

# JESUS IN THE CORNFIELD

## SERMONS FOR HARVEST AND FLOWER FESTIVALS

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Jesus in the cornfield

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## JESUS IN THE CORNFIELD







# SERMONS FOR HARVEST AND FLOWER FESTIVALS

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# CONTENTS

	PAGE
1. JESUS IN THE CORNFIELD . . . . .	3
By ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B., B.A.	
2. BREAD AND FORGIVENESS . . . . .	13
By J. MORGAN GIBBON.	
3. A HARVEST GREETING . . . . .	23
By HUGH MACMILLAN, D.D., LL.D.	
4. TRANSFORMERS OR CONFORMERS (FLOWER SERMON) . . . . .	37
By J. A. CLAPPERTON, M.A.	
5. OUR DAILY BREAD . . . . .	45
By CHARLES LEACH, D.D.	
6. NATURE'S MYSTERY OF GOOD . . . . .	57
By FRANK BALLARD, M.A., B.Sc.	
7. RAIN, SNOW, AND THE FRUITFUL WORD . . . . .	75
By THOMAS G. SELBY.	
8. THE FORGOTTEN SHEAF . . . . .	95
By GEORGE H. MORRISON, M.A.	
9. HARVEST LESSONS FROM THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND . . . . .	103
By GEORGE MILLIGAN, D.D.	

	PAGE
10. THE ARK IN THE HARVEST-FIELD OF BETH-SHEMESH . . . . .	115
By HUGH MACMILLAN, D.D., LL.D.	
11. A PLEA FOR PERSEVERANCE . . . . .	131
By E. GRIFFITH-JONES, B.A.	
12. THE HARVEST OF LIGHT . . . . .	143
By JOSEPH HALSEY.	
13. THE DUTY AND JOY OF GRATITUDE . . . . .	159
By BERNARD J. SNELL, M.A., B.Sc.	
14. SOWING AND REAPING . . . . .	167
By J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.	
15. GRATITUDE FOR DIVINE MERCIES . . . . .	177
By Principal D. ROWLANDS, B.A.	
16. THE BLOSSOMING ROD (FLOWER SERMON) . . . . .	193
By ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B., B.A.	
17. THE SPIRIT OF THE HARVEST-GIVER . . . . .	203
By J. A. CLAPPERTON, M.A.	
18. THE HAPPY PEOPLE . . . . .	211
By J. MORGAN GIBBON.	
19. THE TEMPORAL AND THE SPIRITUAL . . . . .	221
By T. RHONDDA WILLIAMS.	
20. GOOD THINGS OF GOD . . . . .	233
By JAMES THEW.	

# JESUS IN THE CORNFIELD

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., LL.B., B.A.

“Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the corn.”—MATT. xii. 1.

# I

## JESUS IN THE CORNFIELD

THIS incident appears at first sight to be hardly worthy of note. The Prophet of Nazareth would naturally walk through cornfields, in a country where highways were rare and byways common. Yet no fewer than three Evangelists mention it, although only one recalls His most stupendous miracle—the raising of Lazarus from the dead. How are we to account for this? Probably the reason lies in the fact that our Lord's teachings, associated with the corn that day, were so full of inspiration that the disciples could never forget their walk with Him. Apart from the discussion with the Pharisees which followed, He doubtless drew lessons, according to his custom, from the corn through which He strolled with His friends around Him. And the nature of His teaching we may fairly conjecture from His recorded utterances on similar occasions.

The association of the Sabbath with the corn in every harvest festival is suggestive as well as appropriate. Both bear witness to heavenly influences sent down on responsive soil. Each reveals something of the union required between human effort

and divine benediction. In both we may see silent and steady progress to a certain consummation, when the command will be heard—"Thrust in thy sickle and reap; for the time is come for thee to reap."

It is good to live in the country, for there we seem nearer to God than in a noisy city. Processes are natural rather than artificial; and what we see around us is not manufactured with fret and toil, but grows silently in the sunshine. Those who are country-born and country-bred have some advantages over those who struggle for an existence in a crowd. Jesus Himself was a villager: born in a manger, cradled amid meek-eyed oxen, brought up in the hamlet of Nazareth, where flowers and corn grew on the hillside and birds sang in the trees, while "the little hills rejoiced on every side." There our Lord was trained. Thence He went to Tiberias or to Jerusalem, to rebuke vice, to live a clean and simple life amid bad surroundings, and to make more wholesome a society which but for Him was pestiferous. And still our cities largely owe their physical and moral health to the wholesome current of life which is always flowing into them from the country. This will be true in proportion as Jesus, the world's Redeemer, is seen walking through the corn, ready to teach all who will listen.

We may be sure that the great Teacher did not dwell on trifles during that memorable walk. He would speak of essential verities, which concern human character and destiny; and as what He said about these would be in harmony with His teaching elsewhere, we may conjecture with some degree of accuracy the subject of His talk.



There are three factors in man's destiny which were illustrated by the cornfields in our Lord's teaching on other occasions, and probably on this also. They are these—*Love, Labour, and Life.*

## I

*Love—Divine and Human*

Jesus often spoke on. Indeed, He was the living incarnation of both. He was no sentimentalist, no day-dreamer. He appreciated the beautiful as no one else did; yet life was too serious and too sad for Him to play with mere prettinesses. The Persian poet Sadi tells of a pious man who was aroused from a sleep, in which he had been smiling over pleasant dreams, by a friend, who asked—"What rare gifts have you brought us from that garden where you have been recreating?" "Well," replied the dreamer, "I fancied that I said to myself—'When I reach yonder rose-bower, I will fill my lap with flowers, and bring them as a present to my friends'; but when I got there the fragrance of the roses so intoxicated me that the skirt dropped from my hands, and after all I brought you nothing." Many a man thus dreams of the beautiful, has visions of loveliness, but comes back to us with empty hands, and cannot give us even a faded rose. Not so with our Lord. He gave teaching which would make any man braver and purer; He enriched the world with truth, without which it would be miserably poor; and He brought us pardon, the purchase of His blood.

Foremost was His revelation of the truth that *God is love*. He told His hearers that His Heavenly Father fed the birds and clothed the lilies and cared for children, and that every harvest was due to His bounty. In a startling miracle, which He repeated, He wrapped up in one act God's processes of Nature, condensed into one hour the work of the seasons ; and the poet is right who sings—

'Twas spring-time when He blessed the bread,  
And harvest when He brake.

And observe, it was no luxury which He thus provided, but a necessary. He gave to the people the common barley bread, which even the hardy Roman soldiers complained of, and a few fish, which might often be had for the asking. He did not provide, nor did He even promise, luxuries, but taught us to pray "Give us this day our daily bread." If only society were more simple, more content with what is needful ; if all were freed from a selfish, grasping spirit, none need die of starvation. Too often our sins destroy, or waste, what God gives. Some are indolent, careless, and vicious, forgetful of the divine law "If a man will not work, neither shall he eat." Others, greedy of gain, combine to make "corners," that they may force up prices to their own enrichment. Sometimes nations fight, and as a "military necessity" armies destroy fertile fields ; and sometimes governments oppress the poor by taxation, till body and soul can hardly be kept together. Surely the angels must look with wonder on our strife and waste. To them we must appear a crowd of lunatics fighting for food, while we trample under foot what,

if fairly divided, would suffice for the needs of all. Modern society thus defies God's laws and sets at nought the provisions of His bounty.

We meet, then, to praise God for the wonderful love which gives us our daily bread ; but still more let us adore Him for the provision He has made in Jesus Christ for our spiritual wants. Pardon, peace, hope, and joy are freely proffered to us all. Like the harvest, these are not meant for the few, but for all. The Saviour died not for us only, but for the whole world ; and, like a great preacher, we may exclaim—"It is my joy to proclaim that salvation, without distinction and without exception, can be obtained on the simple condition of taking God at His word." "The Spirit and the bride say, Come . . . and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

## II

*Labour is a Second Factor in Life's Destiny which  
we may Associate with a Harvest Field*

Jesus often spoke of it. In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, He showed our responsibility for God's service. The world's need of the Gospel He illustrated by pointing to fields already white unto harvest, and taught us to pray God to "thrust forth labourers into that harvest." Such labour devolves on all Christians, and it will be rich in result in proportion as God blesses it ; just as harvest depends on rain and sun.

Any work, unless it be associated with evil, is a blessing to the man who does it. It is a curse to

any nation to have a numerous class of idlers in its midst. Much of the vice which unhappily prevails is due to the existence of a class of men mercilessly branded by John Ruskin, in one of his Oxford lectures, as "a fanged but handless spider, that sucks indeed and stings, but cannot spin." It is one of the curses of gambling that it multiplies this class of parasites, who suck the blood of the community ; for it tempts to the neglect of industry ; and character as well as wealth depends on labour.

Besides, land waits for man's toil. In some districts, where farming does not pay, men have allowed the soil to lie fallow, and have taken the gates off their hinges, and very swiftly whole tracts of country once covered by productive cornfields have lapsed into the condition of a desert ; and honest labourers have gone to swell the crowd of struggling starvelings in some of our cities.

Still more dire, however, is the moral condition of the idlers who neglect to sow good seed in God's field. The result is speedily seen in a crop of evil thoughts and vicious lives ; for, as the young Duke of York said in *Richard III.*—

Sweet flowers are slow and weeds make haste.

There will be no lovely blossoms in the garden, no ripened corn in the field, unless, like the good husbandman, we are able to ask—"Did not I sow good seed in my field?" Even if we do that, we may be cursed by weeds ; but if there be no good sowing, the whole crop will be only fit for the burning. Therefore, with all diligence, sow in your own mind, and in the minds of your children, right

thoughts, which may grow into acts, and the acts into habits, and the habits into character.

But we are called upon to accept a responsibility which is broader than that. As teachers and witness-bearers we are to take part in preparing for God's harvest in the world. If we have opportunity to rebuke evil, to inspire a noble ideal, to make others braver, purer, more devout, it is our duty to use it to the utmost. For thus it is that we go forth carrying "the seed of the kingdom," and as in Nature sun and shower follow sowing, so the power of God's Spirit will accompany our labour, that it be not in vain in the Lord. Three years of laborious work were put in by the late R. W. Dale of Birmingham, at the beginning of his ministry, and then he wrote to John Angell James, his senior colleague, a sad letter, declaring that his efforts were useless, that he was standing in the way of some one who could do the work better—so wretchedly poor were the results. Yet unknown to himself he was at that very time building up noble characters, and bringing men out of darkness into marvellous light. Let us trust our work to God; and as the husbandman has long patience, so may we have, until the great day of ingathering comes, when he who sows and he who reaps will rejoice together.

### III

*Life is the Third Factor in our Destiny which we  
may well think about*

Love is represented in the bounty which provides increase. Labour by work in the fields which

accompanies it. Life by the corn cast into the ground, which grows we know not how. It is about this that Jesus said "the kingdom of God is within you."

This kingdom begins, as does Nature's harvest, with what is small, feeble, and for a time buried out of sight. An impulse towards righteousness, a longing after God, a wish to be clear from sin, a yearning for truth, may be inspired in the heart. This is like the germ of life in a grain of corn cast into the soil, lost and buried for a time, but afterwards springing up and multiplying itself. If we welcome such holy thought, and suffer it to influence daily life, it will surely grow, because it is divine and God cares for it. Therefore we need not be over anxious about it. A farmer does not uncover the seed to learn how it is going on. He does not constantly tap the barometer, nor is he filled with foreboding. Having trusted his seed to Nature, that is to God, he knows that he must wait. Only we must see to it that the seed in our hearts is good, because, if reading and companionship give us evil thoughts, they too will germinate readily, as tares do amid the wheat.

Never let us forget that our harvest is coming on apace. With many, spring-time is already over. The sowing is nearly finished. And each of us will reap as we sowed. "Be not deceived: God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."

# BREAD AND FORGIVENESS

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. J. MORGAN GIBBON

**“Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins.”**  
**MATT. vi. 11. 12.**



## II

### BREAD AND FORGIVENESS

IN these words two seas meet — man's need and God's bounty. There is nothing infinite in man, said Pascal, except his poverty; and here we have the two words that of all others give expression to human poverty—*bread* and *forgiveness*.

But perhaps some one will say, "Why drag in a profound theological theme into so simple a matter as a harvest festival?" Men differ on dogmas, but bread forms an appreciable part of every man's theology. All believe in bread, and to-day we might look for a sunny simple text culled from the broad fields of natural religion, and be excused for once the dismal topic of sin and the theories that cluster round the doctrine of forgiveness.

Well, the objection is plausible. Yet the Bible disallows it from first to last. Food and forgiveness are linked together in both Testaments.

Nature festivals are older than the oldest history. As soon as man became human his pulse quickened at the promise of spring and his heart was touched by the generosity of autumn. The miracle of the yearly resurrection awoke a sense of wonder, and the gifts of fields and trees created a sense of gratitude

in him. The law that came through Moses found the harvest festival firmly established in the world. Men had rejoiced in spring and offered thanks in the autumn long, long before the law was given on Sinai.

But if the law did not create, it recreated those ancient festivals for Israel. It transformed them, and read new and greater meanings into them.

The spring festival became the Passover, the Festival of God in history the national acknowledgment of God's activity in Nature and human nature alike. "Ye are God's tilled land." "The vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant."

The autumn festival, held in October, was no longer confined to harvest. Bread is not God's only gift, nor is it man's greatest need. And so thanksgiving for the law revealed on Sinai blended with Israel's praises for corn and wine.

Nay, more. Before the nation was permitted to enter upon its possession in the autumn fields, the law obliged it to look within and contemplate the harvest of holy deed and high endeavour which was ripe for God's gathering.

Israel was His portion, His vineyard. How thrive the fields of God? What are the prospects of His vintage?

Every year the same report came from the fields of God within. God's harvest was poor! Hence the great Day of Atonement and the Black Fast—a fast so rooted in the Jewish conscience that our own Stock Exchange has year by year to take cognisance of it. The commerce of the world slows down

while God's ancient people bemoan the scanty harvest and niggardly vintage of the Lord.

Then, and then only, having by the light of the law looked into themselves, were the Jews allowed to pass through the portals of the Black Fast into the sunshine and the fields white for the sickle, and the vineyards aglow with their burden of joy.

Was the harvest poorer than usual? It was better than they deserved; and for the rest, they could trust God.

Was it abundant? Then they felt afresh the wonder of the love and patience of God.

Much or little, it was God's gift, and He knew best. Blessed be the name of the Lord!

## I

Well, as the form of the Old, so is the spirit of the New Testament. Jesus has indissolubly linked bread with forgiveness. Neither in prayer nor praise must these be separated. What the Lord has joined together let no man put asunder. By nature we are voracious of material things. We take all manner of pleasant things with complacency. But if a crumpled rose-leaf ruffles our couch, if an item of our usual comforts is lacking, how quickly and hotly we resent it! Yet why should a living man complain?

To the fields? My friend, you are not fit to go either to your field or table till you have descended into your own soul and seen what table is spread there for the Lord, and what is the promise of His harvest.

The modern demand is for "bright and popular

services," for pulpits piled with fruit and garlanded with flowers, for joyous, galloping music, and bright short sermons, ending with a collection—also oftentimes very short.

And yet, with all this brightness and colour and variety, are we very happy? are we deeply touched? Is not the temper of the modern man, for all his "brief and bright" services, somewhat peevish?

I have a dog that cries out if a bit of paper lights on him, or a whirling autumn leaf touches him in passing on its merry way. He is not hurt. But he does not wait to see whether he is hurt or not—he cries out! He has caught the spirit of the age! Very little makes us cry out.

We have an idea that an average of comfort is due to us. If that is observed, well and good. If it is exceeded, better still. But if things fall short of it? We impeach the universe. We demand amends.

And yet, what is our due? What is God's debt to us? Sit down quickly and set forth the account—debt and credit. How much owest *thou* unto thy Lord?

Some arrears, are there not? A little *behind*, are you not? Was not Dr. Jowett right when he said, "The great question is not what I think of God, but what God thinks of me?" Ah yes! we need the text just as it stands the moment we look within. "Give us our daily bread, *and* forgive us our trespasses."

Due indeed! It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not *consumed*. God is in Christ reconciling an undeserving and *ill*-deserving world to Himself,

not reckoning unto them their trespasses. Yes! do not reckon, O God, lest even *Thy* mercy should fail.

## II

We must keep the inner and outer harvest both well in view in order to appreciate those inequalities of fortune which God allows and uses. This world is not in a normal state, nor are we normal. It is like a hospital, a place of healing; like a school, a place of teaching and discipline.

The world is subject to vanity. Things are unequally divided. Even its Bethesda pools are intermittent. There is no human lot, however favoured, which can count on an unbroken succession of the angel's visits.

"There are," said Bacon, "three times, if times they may be called, or parts of eternity. The first, the time before beginnings, when the Godhead was only, without the being of any creature. The second, the time of the mystery, which continueth from the creation to the dissolution of the world; and the third, the time of the Revelation of the Son of God, which time is the last, and is everlasting without change."

"The time of the mystery." Yes, that is the time which now is, and behold it is a mystery of godliness, of culture, training, salvation. It is the mystery of our double need—bread *and* forgiveness.

If you would not be pessimistic and despair, nor rebellious and blaspheme, remember this. Losses, disappointments, the sorrows and privations of life are the hammers and chisels of an Artist who out of

the rude block of nature is carving the loveliness of holy character.

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go !  
Be our joys three-parts pain,  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain ;  
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge the  
throe !

Give us this day our daily bread, and, our Father  
which art in Heaven, forgive us our trespasses !

### III

Finally, bread and pardon are thus linked together by our Lord in order to help us to a holy unity of life.

Passing through the dark gate of confession, the Jew was led to make *consecration* a principal part of his thanksgiving service. The bitter herbs and the dry, unpleasant, unleavened bread, typical of poverty and sorrow and flight, were eaten as signs that men recognised the uses of dark and bitter things, that they consented to God's employment of them in the spiritual culture of their lives. They consecrated their sorrow to the Lord.

But "ye shall bring out of your habitations two more loaves . . . baken with *leaven*, unto the Lord."

Leavened bread was the pleasant, wholesome bread of everyday life. It typified leisure and pleasure. It was the symbol of the average, and when used in worship it meant that men recognised the hand of God in the daily mercies and ordinary

events of life, and that they consecrated their home comforts, their joys and successes to Him for His use and glory.

Well, the unleavened bread of life carries home the thought of God to most of us, and we consecrate the unusual to the Lord. We recognise the holy aspects of trouble, sickness, and death. But no man lives on unleavened bread, and is it to our shame that the bitter is a surer reminder of God than the sweet? the occasional thunder than the daily sunshine?

"The customs of Heaven ought surely to be more sacred in our eyes than its anomalies; the dear old ways, of which the Most High is never tired, than the strange things which He does not love well enough to repeat."

Bring in, then, into your psalm of praise the ordinary and the extraordinary, the old and the new. Consecrate the leavened bread of your prosperity as well as the bitter herbs of your sorrow. Without this, what are we but ritualists of the shallowest type; hypocrites that love to stand and praise in decorated synagogues that we may be seen of men?

But let us do better. As the soil passed into the seed and the seed into blade and ear and corn, as corn passed into bread and bread into flesh and blood, and that into energy and thought, so let the great miracle of Transubstantiation still continue: let energy and thought pass into character, till character is perfect in holiness, till at last the prayer for bread and pardon shall also pass into heaven's perfect praise and thanksgiving without end!





# A HARVEST GREETING

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. HUGH MACMILLAN, D.D., LL.D.

“And, behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto the reapers, The Lord be with you. And they answered him, The Lord bless thee.”—RUTH ii. 4.

### III

#### A HARVEST GREETING

BETHLEHEM is still "the house of bread," as its name means, and the way to Bethlehem is still through fields of barley in April as in the days of Boaz. A quarter of a mile below the town, on the slope of the hill, the traditional site of the threshing-floor of the great Hebrew farmer is pointed out to the visitor; and its authenticity is exceedingly probable, for it is just in the place where the Bible narrative prepares you to look for it. We read in the advice which Ruth's mother-in-law gave to her, that she said of Boaz, "Behold, he winnoweth barley to-night in the threshing-floor. Wash thee therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee, and get thee *down* to the floor." Now threshing-floors are always in the same field where the corn or barley is reaped; for all the threshing and winnowing processes in the East, owing to the fineness of the weather, are done in the open air; and they are always in the highest part of the field, which is most exposed to the wind, so that in winnowing the chaff may be blown away from the grain. You might therefore have expected that Naomi would ask her daughter-in-law to go *up* to the threshing-

floor. But her words are true to the local peculiarities, which are different from those of other places. The town of Bethlehem covered the whole top of the hilly ridge on which it was built. It occupied the highest ground in the country, so that any place round about was lower than itself; consequently there was no room for a threshing-floor on the heights where it would naturally be situated. The threshing-floor of Boaz, like his farm, had to be formed at a lower level, in some such declivity as the traditional spot. Ruth had therefore to go down to it, as the sacred narrative tells us; and this little coincidence confirms in a most interesting and unexpected manner the local accuracy of the Bible writer, and shows that he must have written not from imagination, but from having lived on the spot, and been familiar with its peculiar features.

It was a beautiful April day, and the barley-fields of Boaz below the town of Bethlehem—this crop being always the first to ripen in Palestine as in our own country—was lying golden under the blue cloudless sky, and the reapers had begun with their sickles to cut it down. It was a picturesque sight, full of colour and animation; the light blue and red dresses of the women—which are exactly the same now as in the days of Ruth—contrasting with the yellow grain and glowing with intense vividness in the brilliant sunshine. It was a scene that an artist would have loved to paint; as indeed it has often been painted, for who does not remember some artistic representations of “Ruth among the

alien corn"? Boaz came down from his residence in the town to see how the harvest work was going on, and his salutation to his people and their response show to us a state of things truly idyllic. In all the beautiful story there is not a finer touch than this devout and fervent greeting between master and servants in the barley-field. It is a most charming picture of the simple piety and pleasant manners of the early days. It appeals to the heart and quickens the imagination. The intercourse of Boaz with his reapers shows to us that the relations between them were not commercial, but patriarchal. He took a warm interest in themselves and their doings, and they in their turn were kindly affectioned towards him. He not only supervised the work of his servants, but gave them a hand in it. He partook of the same food with them, and quenched his thirst from the vessels which the young men had drawn for common use. It was no niggardly hand that dispensed the provisions of the harvest-folk; and an injunction was given to the reapers to allow the poor strange gleaner to glean even in among the sheaves where the ears were more plentiful, and to let fall handfuls of the grain on purpose that she might pick them up innocently and increase her store.

The goodness of God in the bountiful harvest opened the heart of the husbandman and made him generous and free-handed. Everything connected with the harvest seemed to expand the sympathies and enlarge the hearts of those who had to do with it. Freely was given what was freely received.

There was no grudging or meanness. What our Lord and His disciples did when they passed through the ripe fields of corn on the Sabbath day and plucked the ears, and with this simple fare satisfied their hunger, was in perfect harmony with the generous harvest customs of the country. The fields stretched for miles away to the horizon, without any walls or hedges between the separate properties to bar one's passing from one to another, and make the wayfarer feel that he was a trespasser; and thus the privilege of doing what the disciples did was made easy and natural. The right of the passing traveller to pluck and eat his fill of the ripe wheat, or even to allow his horse to browse on the tender grain and on the grass that grew up among it, was a test of the time-honoured law of these hospitable lands, and was never called in question.

It is a common subject of reflection how much more easily persons part with things than with their equivalent value in realised money. When a thing is converted into hard cash it seems to harden and contract the generous impulses of the heart. It is in accordance with this principle in human nature that tradesmen and others will give freely of their goods to stock a bazaar for church purposes, when they would not give you the twentieth part of the value of these goods in money directly for the worthy object. In former times, when money was scarce and seldom seen, farmers and others gave away articles of food with bountiful kindness to their poorer neighbours; and when payment was made in kind there was far less stint and grudging than when it was made in

money. The beggar who went about with his meal-bag from door to door got his handful of meal from every housewife as the regular thing, and he was never sent away unrelieved or with a harsh word. Payment in kind is somehow more easily made than payment in cash; for it belongs to the older experiences of human nature, when men's wants were few and simple, and could be supplied by the harvest-field; whereas cash belongs to an age of trade and merchandise, when the wants even of the poorest cannot be gratified by the harvest-field, for they have been indefinitely multiplied and complicated.

You notice at the present day, when the commercial rule is universally applied, and the farmer has to save even off his food and economise in everything in order to eke out the sum of money due for his rent, and to convert what used to be freely given away without a thought into coin for that purpose, that even in these hard times, when money answereth all things, how differently a farmer behaves in the harvest-field and in the market-place. In the harvest-field he is open-handed, generous, kindly; he feels instinctively, though he does not and cannot express it in words, how beautiful and joyous a thing is the harvest in nature, and as God gives it. After all the changes of the weather, and all the toils and anxieties connected with them, the corn is ripe enough to be cut down by the scythe, and he feels that his labours are repaid. It is reaped with cheerful hearts in the mellow autumnal sunshine, and the piled-up golden sheaves are carried

to the barn amid the songs and laughter of the harvest-home. But the farmer has to sell his corn to pay his rent and to provide other necessities for his household ; and in the market-place his nature is entirely changed. If the crop has been good, it has been good all over, and others compete with him, and America must come in with its measureless bushels, that cost almost nothing to produce, to drag down the over-weighted balance of his hope to the lowest point. And so the happy, grateful, generous feeling produced by the labours of the harvest-field has passed away, leaving behind only discontent and envy and an intolerable niggardliness. No wonder that men read with yearning hearts the idyllic account of patriarchal doings, and long to have them brought back. Boaz had no market to fear, no rent to pay. We are told that he was a mighty man of wealth. But his wealth consisted not of money, else he might have been close-fisted with it ; but of true, real goods of the country, the wealth of the harvest-field, that yielded enough for the wants of his own household and for the necessities of his poorer brethren, and left something over for a time of scarcity. And this state of things made him the free-handed, warm-hearted farmer that he is described to have been.

There was a time, not so long ago, when the same simple and generous manners prevailed in our own country among the agricultural class : when those who tilled the soil together fared alike, and masters and servants sat at the same table without any sense of incongruity or unfitness, as if it were the most



natural thing in the world. The harvest-field was looked upon as a kind of communion table in which master and servant recognised their common dependence upon the bounty of the universal Father, and acknowledged the sameness of their human nature, and the sameness of their wants and destinies. And we cannot imagine that this kindly custom, any more than the sitting down together of master and servant at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in the church, and partaking together of the holy symbols, lessened the respect of the servant for the master, or weakened the interest of the master in the servant. So far from putting either of the parties out of their proper place, it drew the relation between them closer, and imparted to it a more gentle and sacred character, of which neither could possibly take advantage. And assuredly, if the employer in every case treated his workmen as Boaz treated those who laboured in his harvest-field, there would be fewer grievances to complain of between them. We hear it often said that servants and workmen are not now what they used to be, alive to their master's interests and faithful in his service. But it is quite as true to-day as it ever was, that good masters make good servants all the world over. And notwithstanding the changed circumstances, and the greater independence of habits which they have caused, servants will still exhibit the old devotion in every case when they are treated with kindly consideration and wise sympathy. The kind and gracious master will still be served with admirable constancy and care, not for pay but for love; not in hard fulfilment of a

contract, but with the heart's warm allegiance, to which the notion of reward is impertinent.

What a fine example of courtesy does Boaz show ! It was with no haughty airs or rough speech that he entered the harvest-field that lovely April day, bringing a shadow over the innocent gladness of the reapers, and giving them a painful sense of their inferiority. "The Lord be with you," was his courteous salutation ; and they, with the reaping-hooks in their hands, and the sweat of honest labour streaming from their faces, paused in their toil among the golden sheaves, and standing up respectfully welcomed him with the equally courteous response, "The Lord bless thee." There was no perfunctory service, needing the master's eye. Diligent in his absence as in his presence, their industry lent all its sincerity and warmth to their greeting. And more beautiful than the sunshine that illuminated the fair scenes of Nature around, and gave a glow of colour to the dress of the reapers and the sheaves which they reaped, were these salutations which passed between master and servants, different in rank and fortune, but made equal in good manners. And why should not the same courteousness be seen still in the fields of rural labour ? Abroad, one of the things which strike one most forcibly is the considerate way in which the better classes address the peasants ; the result being that the one catches the good breeding of the other, and are not rude because they are not rudely treated. And so should it be in our country if the same course were followed.

Usually how little regard have some masters for the

feelings of their dependants ! What rough and harsh language do they address to them—a cowardly as well as an unchristian thing, for the servants cannot retaliate without the risk of losing their situation ! It is of the very essence of Christianity to be tender and considerate, and so to regulate our speech and behaviour that those who are under us may manifest their individuality, act in character, and forget their inferior condition. And no one who loves the Lord Jesus, who humbled Himself and became our servant, came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and so made service the highest dignity and blessedness of life, can possibly act otherwise than in the same spirit of meekness and tender courtesy towards others ; with that gentleness which makes those who serve us try to do their best, and makes them great and not mean in their own hearts, arouses them to a truer self-respect, and leads them into a higher life. The master is as much indebted to the servant as the servant is to the master ; nay, more, if we consider that the servant gives time and health and strength and skill, in return for wages—the life for the means of living—things for which no money can be equivalent, and which can only be repaid in kind by courteous treatment and kindly sympathy and consideration.

We notice the simple sincere piety which characterised the salutation of Boaz and his reapers. It was not a mere conventional style of speech. They put heart and soul into the ordinary pious greeting. I remember well how I used to be touched by the simple earnestness and kindliness with which the

native passer-by on the lonely pathways of Palestine received my salutation. "Naharach said" (May your day be good!) was reciprocated, touching first his brow and then his heart. And so earnest and true was the pious greeting that passed between Boaz and his reapers. They both meant what they said. Their conversation was seasoned with the salt of godliness. There was grace in their hearts, and therefore the words of their lips were gracious. Boaz, as we see in the course of the whole narrative, was habitually a devout man. He set the Lord always before his eyes, and acknowledged Him in all His ways; and therefore it was a perfectly natural thing for him to introduce God's Name into the midst of his ordinary pursuits. He felt that it was by God's blessing that the barley crop had grown and ripened under the favouring heavens, until the reapers were now cutting it down with their sickles, and piling up its golden sheaves on the field. And in his own lips and language Boaz set an example of piety before his servants, so beautiful that they could not but admire and imitate it.

Abraham had previously reckoned the servants of his household as so many "souls." He valued them by what was best in them—the distinctively human and immortal part. A modern master or farmer reckons his servants as so many hands. He only values in them what subserves his purpose, and holds the rest as of no account; and therefore it need not be wondered at that men so rated sometimes behave in a manner as irrational, as if they were hands and not souls, and break out into those law-

less revolts which convulse industry and are disastrous to all concerned. Long experience as well as Scripture truth teaches us that he who feareth not God regardeth not man ; that the fear of God is the only sure foundation of truth among men in their dealings with one another ; and that where this fear is absent the issue is invariably want of mutual confidence and selfish alienation. The brotherhood of man must grow out of and be nourished by the same root as the Fatherhood of God. The commandment is binding, is absolute, that he who loveth God love his brother also. There is a new religion, which Comte and his followers, the Positivists, would substitute for Christianity, which they say is old and effete and should be cast aside. They call this religion the worship of humanity. But humanity without God and without Christ, as all history has proved, is a very mean and unworthy thing. It is only the cross of the Redeemer that makes man worthy with the worthiness bestowed upon him by grace ; that makes him unselfish and self-sacrificing to his fellow-men. Apart from that, men would crush and destroy each other. Wolves rend one another, and so might we, if there were no other restraint, no other higher principle to control us than the mere accident of having the same animal nature as our fellow-men. It is because of the fact that we are all made in the image of the one Father, who loves and cares for us all, and who is seeking at the cost of the suffering and death of His own Son to save us all, that we are bound to love and care for one another, to love one another even as Christ loved us. That is the true restraining power from all

selfishness ; that is the true constraining power to all self-sacrifice and all self-denial for the good of others.

The world in these days is full of loud assertion about rights. But in the Bible we read not about rights, but about duties. He to whom all rights belong came not to assert any rights, but to fulfil all duty, and He says, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you." Sin is the great divider between man and man, for its essence is selfishness. Christ came to do away with sin by His own death, and to unite us to God and to one another in Himself. He draws men to each other by drawing them to God in Himself. Looking, then, on their servants, made in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ, not as "hands" but as "souls," and regarding the workers themselves as more valuable than their work, their thoughtful minds and sensitive hearts as more precious than anything produced by the labour of their hands—let masters say, "We seek not yours, but you." And so the gracious greeting of the master to his servants will ever be, in the workshop and in the market-place and in the field, "The Lord be with you," and the gracious response of the servants will inevitably be "The Lord bless thee."

# TRANSFORMERS OR CONFORMERS

## Flower Sermon

By Rev. J. A. CLAPPERTON, M.A.

“ Be not conformed to this world.”—ROM. xii. 2.



## IV

### TRANSFORMERS OR CONFORMERS

THE objects in the world around us may be divided into two classes—conformers or transformers. Rivers and lakes are conformers. If the sky is bright, so are they; if the sky is dull, so are they. But it is not so with the flowers.

Some years ago I spent a holiday in one of the loveliest spots in Scotland. But the weather was gloomy and wet. The skies were black; the rivers were muddy; the woods were sombre and sad. Green and black were the prevailing colours; brightness was nowhere to be seen. But, wandering one day upon the hills, I found a little mushroom, and it was red as a cock's comb. I looked all around and could see nothing else red. All was green or brown or black. Where had the beautiful red colour come from? The little plant had sucked up the water and the salts from the earth and had changed them into bright red. It was not conformed to the world around, but *it transformed part of that world into a new beauty.*

Have you ever considered the blossom of a water-lily? It is one of the loveliest of flowers. But it grows in the dirtiest of mud. It is itself of a pure

white, but it makes its whiteness out of the slime and mire at the bottom of the lake. *It is not conformed to the soil it grows from, but is transformed into a far higher beauty.*

So is it with the flowers we see around us. Here is a rose. What colour is it? Pink. What was the colour of the soil it grew in? Brown. Of what colour was the air it grew in? Of no colour worth mentioning ; or, if you take it in large quantities, not pink but blue. Of what colour was the water or rain that it drank up? Of no colour at all. Where, then, did the pink come from? *The rose changed all these things* into this beautiful hue that we call pink. It CHANGED THE UGLY INTO THE BEAUTIFUL. It was not conformed to its soil but transformed.

Take a last example, and a very wonderful one. Some years ago Sir Joseph Hooker visited a lonely island in the terrible Antarctic Ocean. He found it covered with a beautiful wild-flower. The whole island was green with the leaves, full of its sweet smell, and brightened by its sweet blossoms. Fifty years before, that island was bleak and bare. No beauty, no colour, no sweet blossoms and no fragrant perfume. How had the change come about?

The little flower was originally a native of Central Asia. It had been carried to Europe and then to Britain. In the middle of the lonely island there was a grave. An English sailor had been buried there. When his grave was dug, an English spade was used, and a few grains of English soil remained clinging to the spade. They had been carried right over the ocean to that distant desert-

island. And in those grains of soil there was hidden a seed of this far-travelled flower. In fifty years that seed had covered the island from centre to sea. It had not conformed to the bleakness and bareness of its surroundings, but it had transformed a whole island. One little seed!

And such are we. We are seeds intended by the Heavenly Gardener to transform ugliness into beauty; harshness and selfishness into sweetness and love. If flowers possess this marvellous power, no less does Christ intend each of us to possess it. He knows that men are difficult to deal with, and that instead of helping Christians to live well and reform the world, they often hinder and resist. But He says, "Love your enemies. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see *your* good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." It is true that many men ignore the Infinite Father; they even go so far as to blaspheme and resist His work. But Christ tells us that if we let our light shine faithfully, men will be changed. They will come to glorify the Father. They will be transformed into the image of the sons of God.

And hence comes the force of St. Paul's warning. "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind." With what solemnity and earnestness we should search our hearts and ask ourselves, "What am I? Am I a conformer to the world, or am I a transformer of the world by the grace of God? Do I take my colour from the foolish and wicked around me, or do I take life as I find it and suffuse it with the spirit of Christ? Do I take the world such as it is around

me and give to it the colour of God's heaven? *Be ye not conformed, but transformed.*

It is surprising that in this great matter the old prophecy receives still another fulfilment (Isa. xi. 6) —“A little child shall lead them.” Many years ago a girl called Annie Gale was converted in the Western States of America. One day a friend called to see her father, and in the girl's hearing remarked, “It's all nonsense for your Annie to think she has been converted. She was just like an angel always. If Dan Hunter could be turned round and made a Christian of, I'd believe in it.” This Dan was one of the worst and vilest, but the young convert felt her heart beating with pity for him. She went to his wretched building and began in her childish way to talk to him about Jesus and God's love to the chief of sinners. After describing her own conversion, she asked him if he was not a sinner and did not need the same Saviour as she did. His rough heart was touched. He fell upon his knees and cried out, “Lord, ha' mercy on the worst of sinners.” His cry was heard, and before the girl left he was praising God for His mercy. But the young girl had proved the triumphant power of her new life. She had become a transformer. Instead of conforming to the unbelief and despair of her friends, she went forth in the name of her Lord and changed ugliness into beauty and sin into holiness and joy. Oh that each Christian could prove himself worthy of his calling, and instead of yielding to the deadening influences of the world, could transform the society in which he lives with the beauty of his own grace and purity !

Faithful Christians in all ages have been enabled by God to live as transformers of those around them. The life of every reformer is a proof of the inspiring fact. They are the flowers of history, ever changing its deformity into beauty. But an example of exceptional instructiveness is to be found in almost the unlikeliest age and country.

In the fourteenth century Italy was indescribably full of crime, greed, and immorality. The Pope deserted his post and fled to France. One of the cardinals wrote to Bologna, when it refused to submit to "the luxury, insolence, and avarice" of the Church, "I shall not leave Bologna till I have washed my hands and feet in their blood." When his day of vengeance arrived, none were spared. Infants at the breast were murdered and flung in heaps in the streets. But he stood all day with a crucifix held aloft in one hand and a sword in the other, repeating the awful refrain, "Kill them ! kill them !—all ! all !" *That* man was shortly after elected as Pope.

In those horrible days God laid his hand on a humble dyer's daughter, Catherine of Siena. She was a simple, self-forgetting woman. "She brought back the Popes to Rome, the real centre of Christianity. She addressed herself to cardinals, princes, and kings. She brought back to God a multitude of souls, and communicated by her teaching and example a new vitality to those great religious orders which were the life and pulse of the Church."

She lived in the worst days of Christendom. But she was not conformed. By the grace of God she largely transformed it. She was a flower in that wicked world, turning its corruptions into sweetness

and light. Oh that each of us would live this triumphant life!

How is it to be done? By regular prayer and ceaseless faith. By waiting upon God daily and consulting His will, our minds shall be daily renewed. With the Divine strength within us we shall do valiantly. But not otherwise. Let us sing and pray week by week in the spirit if not in the very words of the hymn—

O for a closer walk with God,  
A calm and heavenly frame,  
A light to shine upon the road  
That leads me to the Lamb!    Amen

OUR DAILY BREAD

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. Dr. LEACH, Manchester

**“Give us this day our daily bread.”—MATT. vi. 11.**



## V

### OUR DAILY BREAD

THE harvest-field is God's answer to man's prayer for daily bread. Every field of golden corn which waves in the breeze says plainly enough, to those who have ears to hear, that a loving Father in heaven does not forget His children on earth. Every blossom of the spring, which makes the garden beautiful as a bride adorned for her husband, which clothes the fields with smiling beauty, and gives to the hedgerows a glory surpassing that of Solomon, is a proof that God is mindful of His own.

The recurring seasons, seed-time and harvest, winter and summer, all tell the same story of Heaven's bountiful provision for the children of men. But it is when we reach the harvest time that we seem to realise the words of Isaiah in a wide and almost real sense, "The mountains and the hills break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field clap their hands." For it is then we see that "the fir tree has taken the place of the thorn, and instead of the brier there has come the myrtle tree." It is when the orchards are filled with fruits, and the meadows "laugh and sing," that we understand that "better is the end of a thing than the begin-

## OUR DAILY BREAD

ning." It is when we hear the reapers' song and see our barns full of the stuff for our daily bread that we know God hears and answers our prayers.

Among the many lessons which the harvest teaches there are two or three we may do well to notice now. Standing as we do to-day in God's house, surrounded by the first-fruits of the garden, the field, the vineyard, we may well listen to their teaching. With these flowers before our eyes, blazing in all the glorious colours of the rainbow, with all this ripe, rich fruit in our presence, and with all this food laid out before us, we may well say, Teach us your lessons and we will listen and try to learn.

### I

*In the first place, then, we learn something of God's generous provision for man's daily bread.*

The sweet singer in Israel says: "The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing." *Satisfiest* the desire of every living thing! Not simply providing for their necessities, that would be good, but satisfying their desires.

Here, then, is the idea of large, liberal, generous, abundant provision. Not with a closed, niggardly, unwilling hand, but open, full, rich, unsparing, God-like. God's provision is a full cup, filled to the brim, running over. It is "good measure," "pressed down," filling every vessel. When Jesus fed the multitude with the five loaves and two small fishes,

not only was the hunger of each one of the many thousands satisfied, but more was left at the finish than there was at the start. Twelve baskets did not more than suffice for what was over.

God has put such forces in the world, and given to man such knowledge, that all our food supplies can be abundantly enlarged. He has gone on until now ever repeating the miracle of the loaves, and it has become so common and regular that we almost forget that it is God who gives us daily bread.

Such are the forces in the soil, the sunshine, the shower, and man's skill and labour, that a man with a spade can produce food enough for nine mouths beside his own. All the sources of our food supply, all the springs of our life, and of our daily bread, are such that an enormous amount can be produced. God has given to men such knowledge that the fish of the lakes, rivers, and seas can be vastly increased if need should arise. The birds of the air can be multiplied at the will of man and with the blessing of God. The beasts of the field whose flesh man consumes are capable of almost endless multiplication, whilst the fruits of the orchard and the garden and the field can be increased a hundred-fold.

God's answer to man's prayer for daily bread is so full, so bountiful that not a creature need die of starvation.

But I shall be told that there are starving poor in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, and London. I shall be told, and I have been told, of the tens of thousands of people in London, the richest city in the wide world, who occupy tenements of but one room per family. I do not, I cannot deny the fact.

But I ask, and ask in all seriousness, Who is to blame for this?

I know that some, whose thinking is shallow, tell us this is because we are over-populated.

But is this so? Have those who say this considered what such a statement implies? To say that we are over-populated is to say that God is not "the All-wise." For if He sends more people unto the world than He sends food to feed them with, we charge upon Him the poverty and suffering we see in many places. This is not true. It will not bear looking at in the light of reason, not to say the light of revelation. Let us make no mistake. We come into the world with unerring regularity, twenty-one girls for every twenty boys. And with every mouth that thus comes, there usually comes two hands. And in the main those two hands are equal to the production, with the blessing of Heaven, of food for many mouths beside.

Where, then, is the trouble? Where must we look for the cause? If we cannot lay the blame upon our Maker, where must we lay it?

The poverty of which we have spoken may arise from any one or all of the causes which I here now rapidly name. Man's own folly and sin; man's injustice to man; man's idleness, drunkenness, extravagance; man's greed, rapacity, selfishness; unjust laws; and in some cases through infirmity, misfortune, and weakness.

Let man be just to man, just to himself, just to those dependent upon him; let the laws of the people be just and fair and right, and soon all poverty will disappear. It will not be long, under

such conditions, ere "the desert shall blossom as the rose, and the wilderness and the solitary place be glad."

If any of God's children die of hunger, it is not because God so wills it. His provision is large and full and generous.

## II

*In the next place, we proceed to notice the manner in which God answers man's prayer for daily bread.*

In this, as in most other matters, God works through human agency. Man must co-operate with God.

In the spiritual realm this is usually God's method. When the glorious Gospel was to be proclaimed to the world, the Divine took on a human personality, God was made flesh and dwelt among us. No doubt God could have enlightened the world, and published the Gospel to the world in some way we know not of. But we know that it was along the path of the human, and by means of the human, that He sent His good news. Jesus chose twelve men, and not particularly strong or scholarly men at that. Then He elected seventy men and sent them as evangelists to publish the good tidings of salvation. And on the day of Pentecost, when the fulness of the Spirit came, it was upon men that the cloven tongues of fire came, enabling them to speak in other tongues.

And so in the material world God answers our prayer for daily bread by using man as His assistant in its production. In ancient days, when God's people were in the wilderness, it is true that manna fell from heaven for the needs of the people. But even

then some human effort was required before it could be eaten.

But we never have a shower of four-pound loaves. It is true, however, that by the gentle rains of heaven and God's warm sunshine falling upon man's labour, the loaves are produced. The world is not a ready-made clothing establishment. But God makes enough wool grow upon the backs of the sheep, which man tends and rears, to give us all the ready-made woollen garments we require. In co-operation with God, man can get cotton enough in his plantations to supply all human need for it.

Here, then, we see that God blesses human industry. It is God's appointed way of adding comfort and health and happiness to the life of man on earth.

And this gives us the idea that the work of our life which we sometimes call secular is, after all, God-appointed. If human labour be ordained as a necessity in the economy of God's world in the great business of feeding and clothing man, then man is a co-worker with God. And if a man co-operate with God by His appointment, then man's work is not, after all, so very secular. Is not all God-appointed duty very sacred?

Here we get an idea which may be applied to the common concerns of our life, and may help us to the meaning of many a passage in God's Word. "Whether ye eat, or whether ye drink," says an Apostle, "or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

Suppose I am a domestic servant. I have to discharge the ordinary duties and drudgeries which belong to such service. How can I do all to the

glory of God? God wills that men should be healthy, should be fed, should be clothed. When, as a domestic servant, I am making the home clean and sweet and pure; when I am properly cooking the food for the household, so that it shall sustain the life of my people in health, am I not co-operating with God in answering man's prayer for daily bread? And if so, is it not all to the glory of God? And this thought may be carried into all departments of life in which necessary work is being done for the good of man, and thus to the glory of God.

### III

*In the last place, however, let us ever remember that we are all dependent upon God.*

We are told that in the spiritual realm Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, but God giveth the increase." And no one can refute that statement.

Not less true is it in the matter we discuss. Let no one think that we can dispense with God. Let no one suppose that we can bow Him out of His universe. He was here before any of us came, and He will be here when these bodies which He feeds have gone back to the dust.

Though He is pleased to use us, though He puts the honour upon us of allowing us to co-operate with Him, we are absolutely, completely, and entirely dependent upon Him. Man may sometimes so arrange as to have two blades of grass where before there was only one. But the production of the single blade is beyond the power of man.

This is beautifully expressed for us in one of our Harvest Festival hymns :

We plough the fields, and scatter  
The good seed on the land,  
But it is fed and watered  
By God's almighty hand ;  
He sends the snow in winter,  
The warmth to swell the grain,  
The breezes and the sunshine  
And soft refreshing rain.

He only is the Maker  
Of all things near and far ;  
He paints the wayside flower,  
He lights the evening star ;  
The winds and waves obey Him,  
By Him the birds are fed ;  
Much more to us, His children,  
He gives our daily bread.  
All good gifts around us  
Are sent from heaven above ;  
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord,  
For all His love.

Yet, in spite of all this, I know there are many who speak of their independence. Years ago I met with such a man. I was his guest. He showed me over his works, and told me of his prosperity. He repeated to me how he began his life as a poor lad, and contrasted his present prosperous and comfortable position with what he had at the beginning. There was much more to the same effect.

After I had listened to all his story, and with a good deal of interest, I ventured to say some such words as these :

"Yes, God has indeed blessed you in rich abun-



dance, and you have cause for great thankfulness to Him every day."

I was not a little surprised by his answer. Here it is, as well as I can remember it :

"Well, I don't know about that. I have always worked hard. I am an independent, self-made man."

Independent! self-made! How very curious that men should thus talk. When I see one of these self-made, independent men, I like to have a good look at him. I feel disposed to say, "Turn round and let me examine you." It does not take long to discover that they are indeed of a narrow, domestic growth. Home-made garments usually proclaim their lowly origin. Few people ever mistake them for the productions of the skilled hands. It is usually so with these independent men.

How foolish it is to forget that of all creatures man is among the most dependent. He is completely dependent upon the goodness and bounty of God.

This Harvest Festival will not have been in vain to-day if we learn from it these useful lessons: God bountifully provides for man's daily bread; He allows and requires man to co-operate with Him in its production; and for all we have we are dependent upon our Father in heaven.



# NATURE'S MYSTERY OF GOOD

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. FRANK BALLARD, M.A., B.Sc.

“ I remember God, and am disquieted.”—PSALM lxxvii. 3 (R. V.).

“ Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men !”—PSALM cvii. 8, 15, 21, 31.

## VI

### NATURE'S MYSTERY OF GOOD

THE tone of troubled contradiction in the former of these quotations should not unduly shock us, for there are always plenty of facts apparently to justify such a sentiment, and there is no necessary Nemesis of faith in being staggered as the psalmist was. It was indeed the very reality of his faith which gave point and weight to his mental anguish. That which overwhelmed him was the shock to an expectation rationally based upon belief. To this hour it is undoubtedly because we "remember God," and therefore expect such different things, that we are often bewildered, if not crushed, by the painful disappointments and perplexities which we encounter in human life. It belongs, however, to the very essence of manhood that our judgments should rule our feelings. We can never afford to allow our emotions to become our dictators. Confessedly, when we think of all earth's innocent suffering, especially that due to accident, disease, calamity, and famine, our problems are more grievous than those of the ancient seer. The vast growth of modern populations, together with our fuller know-

ledge of events, put upon these words of his an emphasis which is simply appalling to every sensitive mind. It must, moreover, be frankly owned that no complete answer to the pained inquiry as to why suffering should be so manifold in its nature and so indiscriminate in its occasion, is to be obtained from science or philosophy or religion.

And yet, we being as we are, the patience of a blind trust is sometimes perfectly rational. In a distressing case of physical malady not long since, occurring to a Christian man of noble character, the surgeon in attendance turned sharply upon the minister of his church with the query, "And how do *you* explain such a case?" To which it was entirely reasonable to reply, "Do you, can you, explain the details of your practice to your little child?" It is measurelessly unreasonable to expect that the whole design of an infinite God should be made clear to the infinitesimal intelligence which is here associated with a few ounces of brain, and has but a short time to exercise itself upon a tiny planet.

Meanwhile, if we are utterly unable to solve the mysteries of life's darker side, there is one thing we can do, viz. observe and appreciate the brighter side. In so doing we may come to understand how a Laureate could write—

And all is well, tho' faith and form  
Be sunder'd in the night of fear ;  
Well roars the storm to those that hear  
A deeper voice across the storm.

That "deeper voice" has always been audible to those who have listened for it, in spite of all earth's

tempest of sighs and groans. For besides that tenderest and truest voice of all which the Christian heart recognises in the midst of the direst tumult, saying, "It is I, be not afraid," there are yet other intimations and assurances which cannot be mistaken and ought never to be forgotten. The ancient apostolic appeal to these is increasingly valid for every generation. "And yet God left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness." This boundless and ceaseless mystery of good in Nature, merits much more appreciation than it receives. In full view of the whole opposing trend of modern thought, we may indeed say, definitely and deliberately, that even here alone we may find good ground for the trust that we are "not only cunning casts in clay," not insignificant and worthless human bacilli, after Haeckel's suggestion, but children of a Heavenly Father who has not left and will not leave us without hope or comfort.

There is a well-known proverb that "the exception proves the rule," and this may have quite as valid application to matters vast and difficult as to the trifles of an hour. For it can never be said too plainly, or too often, that even now, in our terrestrial midst, it is the good which is the rule and the evil which is the exception. In face of all the facts, this is not a world that can be truly represented by a few white streaks upon a black ground, but rather by a few dark lines upon a white ground. Again and again an honest philosophy must reiterate that the mystery of evil is but little compared with the

mystery of good. Truly, in every walk of life those who "cannot see the wood for the trees" provoke our astonishment, not to say our indignation. What, then, shall be said of those who see so clearly, and lay such bitter stress upon, the painful exceptions to this world's great rule of being, but pass by the innumerable instances of good which constitute that rule, as though they were but inconsiderable trifles? At all events, it will be entirely appropriate now that we should leave for a while the exceptions which shock and sadden us, in order to do ampler justice to that unbounded mystery of good which is Nature's rule.

Let us first call to remembrance a few of the facts. The whole case is, of course, far beyond expression in two or three printed pages. One might as well undertake to describe all the wonder and beauty of the tropics in a sentence, or put the ocean into a little child's toy-bucket, as to depict worthily, within the limits of an address, the whole truth concerning the universe of good of which we ourselves form part. We read the opening chapters of Genesis to-day as a mere poem or an ancient dream; but when we find it written there that "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good," there is in such statement a substantial truthfulness which becomes ever more ample and vivid, in the degree in which we come to know ourselves and our environment.

We really live in many worlds at once, but for our present purpose it will suffice to consider half a dozen phases of reality which lie open to daily experience or observation.



## I

*To begin with what we may term the lowest of these, let us glance at the great world of inorganic nature, that vast area of our environment which is devoid of life or organisation, and is yet the sine qua non of everything that lives.*

For, to mention now but two items of it, what would become of every living organism on earth if the airless and waterless condition of the moon were reproduced around us here? Full well we know that all would perish out of hand. From the simplest alga to the noblest man, life is one in the demand for air, or water, or both, to say nothing here concerning warmth.

But what is this common "atmosphere" which, to all higher organisms, is so utterly essential? Who will put into words for us the constant luxury of "fresh air" to healthy human lungs? What terms will describe the invigoration of the sea-breezes laden with "ozone," or the health-giving inspiration of an atmosphere made fresh through forests and fragrant from the flowers of the country? Whence comes all this upon which we depend so utterly that most of us entirely ignore it? Two gases, mixed by the accident of Nature? Such, in some quarters, is the flippant answer of the hour. But surely we have lived long enough, as reasoning beings, to know what accident can and cannot do for us. Here we have, for our perpetual inbreathing, one-fifth of the stimulating oxygen and four-fifths of the inert diluting nitrogen, both free but

ever in the same proportion ! What if for one short hour these gases should form a chemical combination, such as the modern dentist employs for his anæsthetic ? Yet at this moment there are some fifteen hundred millions of human beings, if we leave other creatures out of account, depending for every breath upon the unchanging balance of these free gases, and enjoying their life only because from generation to generation this proportion is maintained. Do the marvellous inter-relations revealed by modern science between the vegetable and animal worlds avail to lessen either the marvel or the beneficence of this arrangement ? Nay, verily. One might as well affirm that the inter-connected host of complex pipes and trackers seen inside any great modern organ, lessens the sweetness of harmony or the skill of the organist.

Yet, had we but time to discuss it, water is an even greater marvel, and a more vivid exhibition of Divine benevolence. All that the majority of our race know, perhaps, concerning water, is that in some form or other they must have it. Death through drowning is manifestly possible, but death without water is a resistless certainty. Our children, however, to-day know much more than this. They are given to understand that in water we have again two gases, only this time not as a mechanical mixture, but a definite chemical combination, with properties so unique and wonderful that nothing short of a series of lectures could do them justice. In a dozen distinct respects the constitution of water not only ministers to our wellbeing, but is unlike any other substance, solid or liquid, known to men.

Whence, then, come these idiosyncrasies by which we live? If a single drop of water could be magnified to the size of our whole globe, the particles composing it would even then be only about the size of oranges. Yet every one of these would be composite. And beyond the fact that—to borrow the expression of Herschell and Maxwell—they manifestly deserve to be called “manufactured articles,” we penetrate no farther into the mystery of their nature. Doubtless it ministers to the joy of skaters that in winter the ice forms at the surface of our lakes and rivers, rather than at the bottom. But how many of them ask why this is so, or reflect that were it not for this unique and beneficent property of water—to which, with all respect to Professor Tyndall’s memory, bismuth and molten iron afford no real parallel—there would long ago have ensued disastrous consequences beyond measure? To ascribe all this to the mere hap of Nature is but the extreme of childishness.

## II

*But when we rise out of the inorganic world into the realm of living things, beneficent wonders grow and mysteries of good deepen on every hand.*

(i.) The scrutiny which is most thorough most clearly shows these to be innumerable, exhaustless, immeasurable. Tennyson’s oft-quoted apostrophe to the “flower in the crannied wall” is always forceful, but it makes no pretence of answering the larger questions why there should be any flowers at all, or why flowers should be robed in all the hues of the rainbow and enriched so oft with the fragrance which

is beyond describing. If some morning men awoke to find the fields all clad in khaki, and every flower enswathed in hopeless drab, maybe the wonder of the work of chlorophyll which gives us the refreshing green as well as our vegetarian food, together with the selective powers of the plant tissues whereby they extract from the sun's rays the colours which make them so beautiful in our eyes, would seem more worthy of regard. The modern biologist, with his ever-perfecting microscope, peers more and more closely into the mystery of growth. But all he can see is that it is as it is. Why, and how, are as utterly beyond him as beyond a babe. The magic word "evolution," instead of ruling out what some airily term the "God hypothesis," does but magnify and intensify that mystery of good for which there is no ultimate or logical explanation save in the benevolence of God. The whole realm of Nature which we call the "vegetable world" echoes the testimony of Paul. In "filling our hearts with food and gladness," it bears ceaseless witness to the benevolent intentions of its great Author.

(ii.) Still more clear and true and strong, however to the same effect, is the testimony of the higher realms of *animal life*. The most false and mischievous lines that a great poet ever wrote are those—far too often quoted—concerning the man of faith :

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed.

For Nature really does nothing of the sort. Such

a suggestion is but the grossest exaggeration of one-sided sentimentality. Scientific detail by way of proof is here impossible, but with all the more care and deliberation it may be truthfully affirmed, and should never be forgotten, that whatever may be the "struggle for existence" of which some write with such hysterical declamation, the amount of happiness at any given time throughout the whole animal world, exceeds the amount of pain as overwhelmingly as the ocean exceeds the shrimp-pool upon its shores. We may not be able fully to apprehend the universal reasons why pain and death should be the way of life, but we are able to see that the happy facts of the mystery of good in animal existence, transcend the dark side of suffering as truly as some great mountain transcends the little hillocks at its base.

(iii.) But let us enter boldly into the highest realm of all, even that *human life* wherein confessedly the deepest shadows fall, in order that we may see how it is no less true that here is also to be found the clearest and divinest light. Whatever may be the gruesome representations of some scientists or theologians, it is here that Nature's mystery of good finds its noblest height and its profoundest depth.

Let us think first of these wondrous bodies of ours. It is certainly time that Christian teachers ceased to read in public that expression in the Version of 1611 which accredits us with a "vile" body. For not only does the Apostle himself contradict such a monstrous notion when he asks with indignant surprise—"What, know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" but

our modern scientific scrutiny unquestionably points to it as the most wonderful and beautiful structure in the whole organic world. When good Dr. Watts expressed his thankful astonishment that

A harp of a thousand strings  
Should keep in tune so long,

his theology was better than his physiology, for he would have been decidedly nearer the truth if he had said a thousand million strings. So much greater, therefore, should our admiration be than his.

It is not seldom assumed, perhaps half-unconsciously, that the boundless mystery of benevolence which is represented in the constitution of the human body, is reduced to a vanishing point by the forms and degrees of liability to disease which unquestionably accompany it. But such an assumption is a most manifest fallacy when fairly examined. Three things, at least, may claim to be ever borne in mind, as being facts which are not in the least invalidated by regarding the human form as the crown of an evolutionary series. The same considerations would apply in turn to every lower member of the series, down through all the vertebrates even to the lowest invertebrate. Concerning "every living creature, after its kind," the vision of the ancient seer was true that "God saw that it was good," but

*(a) regarding ourselves as the chef d'œuvre of the Divine plan, it cannot be denied that the normal human body is manifestly made for enjoyment.*

It is evidently intended to yield us the peace of painlessness, the delight of the practical use of its myriad parts, the luxury of energetic effort. Again,

*(b) as a plain fact, the amount of happiness in an average individual human life, immensely exceeds the degree of pain.*

Of many noble things recorded concerning the late Mr. Gladstone, it is certainly not the least that on one occasion, during his last six months' illness, when a friend expressed his fear that the venerable sufferer's pain was great, Mr. Gladstone acknowledged that it was, but he added, "You must remember that I have had eighty-six times twice six months free from pain." It is precisely this proportion between good and ill which is so generally forgotten, although it is equally true on the average concerning shorter and less favoured lives. The spectacle of suffering, let alone its endurance, is necessarily grievous to sensitive minds and tender hearts, but if our feelings point to the lesser mystery, our judgment must be heard in its insisting on the greater. The man who takes a year to die with cancer, but has previously had fifty years of unbroken health, is, after all, an indubitable witness to the Divine benevolence in his bodily constitution, whatever be or be not forthcoming as explanation of the actuality of pain.

*(c) Again, therefore, it must be remembered that the number of healthy, and so far happy, human beings at any time in this world, is immensely in excess of those in suffering.*

Plague, famine, hurricane, earthquake, accident, are, as facts, dreadful enough, and we may neither forget nor ignore them. Nevertheless, they do not in the least lessen the foregoing principles, and it remains beyond question that the overwhelming majority of earth's millions of sensitive rational

beings at this moment are so far enjoying life, in the painless use of all those marvellous faculties which make consciousness a boon, that suicides are rightly regarded as pitiable monstrosities.

(iv.) *But further, when we speak of Nature and of human nature, we are surely warranted in including the moral as well as the physical mystery of good.*

For here again the darkness of the shadows bears witness to the brightness of the light. The sinfulness of sin may be allowed to be as bad as the Bible asserts, and as terrible as half the world's misery, resulting manifestly from moral evil, luridly shows. But that does not destroy or diminish the counter fact that, taken as a careful whole, the goodness of humanity is vastly greater than its badness. As in Elijah's day there were seven thousand times more faithful servants of God than he believed, so is there still, amidst all the crimes and follies of our "advanced" civilisation, an unmeasured and immeasurable excess of virtue over vice. Were it not so, indeed, society could not hold together. If the whole truth must be told, the greatest marvel, in face of the conditions under which—throughout the Western nations, at all events—hosts of human beings exist, is not that many men and women are so bad, but that so many more are so good.

We must leave for other occasions the estimate and explanation of this human goodness from the standpoint of Christian theology, as also its relation to that supernatural mystery of light and love which we find embodied in the Christ of the New Testament. Suffice now to point out how in Nature



around us, as we rise ever from the lower to the higher, from the inorganic to the organic, from the lowliest animal to the noblest man, the testimony is always and everywhere the same. Great and tragic as is the mystery of evil, the mystery of good is immeasurably greater and more marvellous.

From this whole consideration, then, we may well draw one or two simple but far-reaching conclusions.

(1) *Taking ourselves and our environment as a whole, there is abundant reason for believing in the overruling goodness of the Eternal God.*

Sir Henry Thompson, indeed, has recently told us how, from the agnostic standpoint, he has discovered universal beneficence in Nature :

I was now assured, by evidence which I could not resist, that all which man with his limited knowledge and experience has learned to regard as due to supreme power and wisdom, is also associated with the exercise of an absolutely beneficent influence over all living things, of every grade, which exist within its range. And the result of my labour has brought me its own reward, by conferring emancipation from the fetters of all the creeds, and unshakable confidence in the power, the wisdom, and the beneficence which pervade and rule the universe (*The Unknown God*, p. 85).

We are glad that to so competent an observer such a conclusion should be possible. How much more should it be valid for those who neither are nor wish to be "emancipated from the fetters" of the creed that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our Father also! For such a faith

the witness of the Christ of the Gospels may indeed alone suffice. But it is an added inspiration of priceless value to be able, on rational lines and the unimpeachable evidence of fact, to discern His goodness in the smiling buds of spring, in the fragrant flowers of summer, in the precious fruit of autumn ; as well as to recognise within ourselves the constant proof of His beneficence in every painless hour, in every thrill of happy emotion, in the boundless possibilities and incalculable actualities of pure pleasure which accompany our physical existence, and above all in the capacity for appreciating moral good.

(2) *Thus we may find overflowing reasons for heartfelt thankfulness and trust every day of our lives.*

Surrounded as we are and saturated with this Divine and exhaustless mystery of good, he who is not thankful becomes no longer man but brute. The ancient judgment was well warranted : " Man that is in honour and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish." None of the dark facts of life, nor all its sorrows taken together, can avail to blot out its brightness, any more than clouds blot out the sun. It may for a while be hidden from our direct gaze, but upon its influence we are living all the time.

When to this thankful recognition of the all-surrounding good in Nature there is added the full assurance of the Christian Gospel, as guaranteed to men in the life and character, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is not too much to affirm that we have as complete an equipment as reverent reason can expect, for that whole conflict with the mystery of physical pain and moral evil which has harassed human life from generations long

before the psalmist even until now. To the Christian disciple assuredly there can be no ground for either pessimism in the present or despair for the future. Of all "the things that cannot be shaken," this plain fact remains most firm, that as the mystery of painlessness is ever far greater than the mystery of pain, so in all directions is the mystery of good not only as real as the mystery of ill, but immeasurably vaster.

But a great deal may and must be added to this foundation fact. For "the mind that was in Christ" means always the reduction of evil to a minimum by prevention, as well as the development to a maximum of all human powers of healing and of help. Nor is practical sympathy its only method of comfort, for at the same time it inculcates a humility and a patience which open the "eyes of our heart" to appreciate truths far more precious than the mere satisfaction of sensations. The very problems of pain which give us heartache become then as valuable, nay, as indispensable, to our higher nature as the intricacies and difficulties and discords of Beethoven are essential to the acknowledged grandeur and sublimity of his music. It is as natural that we should shrink from the hurricane as it is that we should rejoice in the harvest. But it is ours to remember not only that there are far more golden harvest-fields than hurricanes, but that winter's blizzards—and even earthquakes, according to Professor Judd's deliberate verdict as a scientific expert—play their needed part in the great economy of Nature which is always working together for our good.

So that, tremble as we sometimes may, with fear or sympathy, in presence of passing clouds of the darkness that can be felt, there is never enough catastrophe to overwhelm the Christian mind, but only sufficient to call forth the best and uttermost of which it is capable. Moreover, even if, under some especial stress of surrounding storm, we lose all hope of comfort in the present, the boundless possibilities of the future yet remain. He who has fairly estimated the actual mystery of good which enwraps our world may well say, with Paracelsus—

If I stoop  
 Into a tremendous sea of cloud,  
 It is but for a time ; I press God's lamp  
 Close to my breast ; its splendour, soon or late,  
 Will pierce the gloom : I shall emerge one day.

If not sooner, at least in that day "when the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the liberty of the glory of the children of God."

So is the golden glory of the harvest-field, like the rainbow that oft o'erarches it, at once a reminder of the measureless past which has embodied the Divine beneficence, a proof of the same unceasing benevolence in the present, and a prediction of that

One far-off divine event,  
 To which the whole creation moves—

when the mystery of ill shall have served its transcendent purpose and good shall be all in all.

RAIN, SNOW, AND THE FRUITFUL  
WORD

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. THOMAS G. SELBY

“For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater ; so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth.”—ISAIAH lv. 10, 11.

## VII

### RAIN, SNOW, AND THE FRUITFUL WORD

DELIVERANCE from the pain and degradation of the captivity is here pledged to God's people in a message sure and unerring as the ministry of the rain and the snow. The Divine word, rich in life and grace, will in due time beautify with joy and salvation the lot of the afflicted people. The grand assurances of this chapter, which were the basis of revived prosperity, and in which we claim an interest who belong to a later dispensation, find their symbols in these vitalising agencies of Nature.

In the Bible the Divine word is compared both to the seed and to the influences which fertilise the seed. Two different lines of reflection are suggested by the two similes. The wheat sometimes falls into unsuitable or imperfectly prepared ground, and becomes abortive through lack of a responsive environment. It must be content to stay where it alights, and has no power of conveying itself elsewhere. The lack of right human conditions may frustrate the grace of God in individual cases. But the snow and the rain seem to speak to us of the perfect Divine conditions which attend the God-given word.

If the snow and the rain find no life-giving service to fulfil where they first fall, they pass into new regions and contribute to far-off harvests. And is it not thus with God's word? It never proves itself ineffectual on the wider scale. Whilst there may be failure in the space which lies between the seed and the soil, frustration is impossible in the chain of agencies stretching from the sky to the seed.

## I

*The symbols under which God describes His word—the rain and the snow—suggest one or two incidental lessons, apart from the main purpose for which they are used.*

Our faith in the word must not be weakened by *the unpromising conditions* which sometimes attend its first promulgation. The snow and the rain present no outward sign of that wonderful fruitfulness of which they are vehicles. Tennyson has reminded us of the "gentle mist . . . which kept the heart of Eden green before the useful trouble of the rain." If Adam could have been brought from his sunny Eden into the grey, dripping scenes of the common world, he would have seen no relation whatever between the comfortless downfall and the bending ears in the autumn fields. To one ignorant and inexperienced this aspect of Nature would seem to bode evil rather than augur good. As the rain riddles the landscape with its pitiless fusillade, as it foams down the hillside after the tempest, and collects into angry, discoloured pools in the soaked



plain ; as the snow silts like some silent plotter of mischief into the crevices of the hills and spreads its white pall over all green and purple outlines, as it drifts into the furrow and buries plough and harrow from view, and at last wipes out the very hedgerows, these harsh elements might seem to promise desolation rather than fruitfulness. If a Peruvian Indian, who scarcely knows what rain is, and whose maize from time immemorial has been softened by dews and mists, could be put down in Eastern Asia when the monsoon bursts and the happy deluge comes, he would be sure to say, No place for the tiller of the soil this ! Can such a country have harvests ? This thing means death. In the clouds that rumble like earthquake, and out of which water-spouts come, there is no earnest of good. If you were to bring into the thick of a January snow-storm an Egyptian fellah who has always trusted the rising Nile to irrigate his crops, he would say, Strange country this, where cotton flocks drop from the clouds ! Does the English farmer expect verdure and fruitfulness out of this fluffy thing ? Curious Nile which overflows after this fashion ! No place for Hassan or Mahomet with his sluices and pumps and buckets ! Poor outlook if a servant of the Khedive casts his bread upon such waters ! Is it not a fact that in the outward form of the snow and the rain there is no hint of the magic possibilities with which they are charged ?

It is not uncommon to meet with prosy, unbelieving, utilitarian souls who can see little or no earnest of good in the religious movements of the hour. They are irritated by the torrent of talk

pouring itself out without ceasing in churches, Sunday schools, and mission halls. When is this reiteration of Hebrew legends and rhapsodies to come to an end? Why multiply churches when money ought to be spent in rehousing the poor? Why keep up legions of official teachers under whose efforts people yawn, slumber, grumble, bicker, contend, and go astray after the same pattern as the unchurched crowd? Why debate questions that rub human nature the wrong way and are not always open to final settlement? Well, these truths, often imperfectly presented and mixed up in their forms of statement with human ingredients, despised by advanced thinkers as antiquated, unscientific, imaginary, sentimental—these truths whose face value is often at a discount, and whose potencies are not in the outward letter, vibrate with the breath of the Most High, and shall vitalise rich and incalculable harvests. The simple Gospel message, which to unbelieving ears seems so harsh and sterile, which sometimes vexes the heart, bewilders the reason, and obstructs progress by the traditions which gather around it, is a word out of which the Providence that rules in the spiritual world is pledged to bring rare issues, incomparable beauty, gracious fruitions. To the worldly-wise God's word carries little or no promise of the magnificent power with which it is fraught.

Our faith in the word must not be impaired by *the diverse methods* in which it is presented. The fertilising power of the word embodies itself in many forms. In the terrestrial atmosphere it takes the particular shape in which it reaches us. Mist, dew,

rain, snow, and hail effect a common result, and with less unequal degrees of success than we may suppose. The winds that waft vivifying vapours across the landscape set from various, and even opposite, points of the compass. The bounty of the clouds is not all cast in the same mould. This life-giving element may patter in the drops of the thunderstorm, or be shed earthwards by noiseless distillations ; sometimes it comes in startling bursts, and again in measured and steady downfall. Again, it blanches the landscape or turns the fields into lakes and ponds. The varying form matters not, although a man of narrow experience may be tempted to overrate that which is an outward accident. The Indian may have no faith in the snow unless he lives at the foot of the Himalayas. A Yorkshire farmer would watch the tropical monsoon with a fine scorn of its possibilities. An Irish peasant suddenly set down on a glacier might doubt its use to the pasture-lands of the valley. Out of these changing shapes there comes one welcome issue. The heralds who usher in the tender spring and the golden summer are diversely attired but their work is one. The forms and hues assumed by these forces which fertilise are determined by terrestrial latitudes, temperatures, prevailing winds.

And is it not thus with God's word, which takes its outward form from the lip, the brain, and the training of the prophet who speaks it? Under its manifold shapes God claims it for His own, and by a Covenant, sure as that which gives seed-time and harvest in Nature, destines it to a life-giving function in the new and better creation. Would that with a more catholic temper we could recognise God's word

in all the forms under which it approaches us ! We are so prone to want it after our own pattern. The word of God addresses itself to us by all the manifold methods of literature, and but for our traditional reverence for the Bible, we should doubtless be found deprecating the diversity to be found there. The man who is one-sided in his scientific tastes thinks Moses narrow and old-fashioned. The man of affairs, who is as proud of his plainness as the scholar of his culture, sees nothing in the gorgeous similitudes and rhapsodies of Isaiah. Jeremiah is condemned as too mournful by those who are riding upon the crest of the wave. Martin Luther, in his zeal for one aspect of the truth, pronounced the epistle of James an epistle of straw ; and the man of the bustling world, who has no sympathy with mysticism, cannot read the writings of St. John. Some secretly confess that they are repelled by the mixture of the rabbi and the logician in the writings of St. Paul, and they like the idyllic narratives of the evangelists much better. Traditional reverence restrains us to undertones when we speak of men who lived two or three thousand years ago, or we should animadvert on the divergent forms of revelation as freely as a Hindoo ryot would poohpooh the agricultural worth of a snowstorm, or a Yorkshire farmer would grumble at the monsoons which create the prosperity of Asia. God's word is as varied in the phraseology which clothes it as the differently organised brains from which it gathers its colour and its outward form. We are called to trust in its vivifying power when it comes to us in other methods of speech than those amidst which our life has been cradled.

Bible writers wear a halo of peculiar sanctity, and we refrain from all open criticisms, but we perhaps underrate men, not more diverse from each other than were the prophets and apostles, who are the present channels of the Divine word. Some few of us perhaps assume that the converting power of God never works outside an argument, and many who are oppositely constituted assume that the converting power of God never works outside a simple parable or an anecdote. A syllogism has an ungodly sound about it, and a prophet sent from God should never use it. With some men God is the God of the sentiments and the emotions, and not of the understanding; and with others He is the God of the understanding, and not of the emotions. The preacher must have a special cadence or vibration in his tone and a fixed set of phrases, if God is to work through him in soul-transforming efficacy. In a mimetic world it is perhaps a necessary evil that great preachers and evangelists like Spurgeon, Moody, and the famous missionaries should have imitators, but the hearers are in part responsible when they estimate a man's usefulness by the degree of his resemblance to the popular types. These particular forms of appeal, which have seized the contemporary imagination, should not be allowed to discredit other forms which are no less a part of the Divine order. It is a widespread idea that if a man is to turn many to righteousness he must tell quaint stories with the flavour of the backwoods about them; use illustrations shot through with the humour and pathos of the cradle, the farm, the battlefield; be an adept in unsealing the apocalyptic books of the

Bible and allegorising Solomon's Song. When we associate the evangel with a particular form of presenting it grave danger arises. The Divine word is not inseparably wedded to one set of finite idiosyncracies. It must take to itself as many shapes as there are minds to receive and lips to express it. The life-giving virtue of the word is not limited by the manner, method, or temperament of the prophet. The fertility of the field does not depend upon one point of the compass only, nor do the reviving influences which visit men always come across the Atlantic or precipitate themselves from one pattern of cloud. The snow, the hoar-frost, the small rain, and the great rain of His strength have each a sure and an honoured place in the Divine economies of fruitfulness.

The word of the Lord is in itself *essentially pure*, and our faith in its vitalising efficacy must not be impaired by the accidents which may sometimes cleave to it. The Eastern peasant who is trying to save his crops in time of drought by pumping water from a tidal river into his irrigation dykes sighs to remember that the water is brackish and is not so sweet and vitalising as the rain ; but the salt which dilutes its virtue did not come down out of the clouds. It is an ingredient which united itself to the raindrops after they had reached the earth. A London snowstorm is said to be ashen-grey at times, for the flakes have attached to themselves in the course of their fall particles of soot from the chimney-stacks. The white arctic snows have sometimes been found discoloured with red meteoric dust, and the siftings of a sandstorm have been collected

a hundred miles out at sea. But the defilement is in that which goes up from our grim troubled life upon earth, and does not come down from God. And such accidents, after all, do not render the rain and the snow other than sweet, life-giving, and redolent of health. The waters which fall from God's firmament, when tainted by contact with the uncleanness of the earth, yet purify themselves by movement, and the fast-running stream does not continue foul. It is cleansed and oxydised by its restless progress, like the word which is glorified when it has free course. No one fears that plant-blight, phylloxera, or enteric poison may alight on the white wings of a January snowstorm, or dreams that the emerald gradient of an April rainbow may be the path by which the angel of the pestilence travels. The rains as they drop from the skies are not only pure but purifying, and beautify the lands with fruitfulness.

If the word should seem for a moment weak and ineffectual, it is because of the earthly ingredients which by some evil chance have come to cleave to it. The critic, with his academic apparatus, sometimes thinks he has discovered defect in the word; but if that is so, the defect is an accident of the earthly atmosphere through which it comes. The word never fails to purify itself from all adventitious errors in its movement through the souls of men, and proves itself afresh the word of God which is able to save men's souls. Let us keep ourselves and the atmosphere in which we move pure, and the word entrusted to us will be full of fragrance and vital efficacy, pregnant with millennial fruitfulness.

The rain and the snow are endowed with their fertilising properties because they are *continuous gifts which are ever renewed to us*. They suggest the thought that God's word is not identified with traditions and with ancient documents, however sacred, but is an unceasing breath which animates human character and produces human blessedness in all ages. It would be a poor outlook for the farmer if he were dependent on the downfall which fed the rivers of Eden thousands of years ago. We should rightly rate that man a lunatic who, in search of a water-supply for his arid fields, explored the slopes of Ararat in hope of finding pools left by the ancient deluge. The lands cry out in their thirst for rain and snow fresh from the alchemy of the clouds. The moisture that gives the first impulse to the germ will not avail to revive the upspringing blade or to feed the stalk with new sap so that it may carry the burden of the golden ear. There must be the sweet living succession of showers, the early and the latter rain in its season. Does not the metaphor suggest that it is our high privilege to be always receiving the word of God in fresh baptisms of wisdom and spiritual strength? It is true the river valleys, the mountain hollows, in which lakelets nestle, the watercourses covering the plains with silvery network, were scooped out and made ready ages ago, but the rains that replenish them must be ever renewed. We cannot afford to go back a thousand years for the word which quickens and saves us. It is true that there have been past ages distinguished from other ages by their special and copious revelations—the age of Moses, the age of the



prophets, and pre-eminently the age of Jesus and His apostles. But some slaves of the past seem to think that the heavens have never been opened since, and that in virtue of those stored-up revelations which we so rightly prize, the human soul becomes like a well-watered garden. But the worth of the older revelations would be impaired, and even destroyed, apart from the principle of living continuity they inaugurate. The word is not shut up in the stereotyped phrasology of a creed, or even in the most sacred of all books itself. The word must be received anew from above, and not pumped out of prehistoric reservoirs built by spiritual Titans, if it is to stimulate the good which God has put within us, and cause the earth to blossom into perennial fruitfulness.

## II

*The special emphasis of the text is reserved for the truth that the Divine word, like the gifts of the rain and the snow, shall not fail of final effectiveness.*

The bounty of the clouds cannot prove itself abortive. And if there is no breakdown in the economy of Nature, still less can there be ultimate frustration in the kingdom of grace. Sooner or later the Divine word inspired into the prophets will fulfil the glorious behests of the Lord of the harvest.

The snow and the rain in due time find out the seeds awaiting their refreshment, and do not return from the earth till their ministry is fulfilled. There are no water-spouts drawing back the entire rainfall.

no inverted storms like the toy snow-showers in glass globes, working either way, with which we used to amuse ourselves in childhood, no premature evaporation which leaves the fields tilled by the toiler sterile. The attraction of the earth holds the descending waters till their work is done. The rain and the snow would blush to return fruitless to Him who sent them. If the call upon their service is not immediate they wait in the glacier, or hide themselves in the snowfields, or tarry in the springs beneath the rocks till the life-quickenning occasion comes. They roll on in the volume of great rivers to new latitudes ; and if the lush meadows and the springing fields seem to say, "Not needed here," they wander with patient benignity till at last they kiss the thirsting outstretched roots with the greeting of God. They discover the germs of buried life in their progress, and paint deserts with the verdure of Eden and the crimson of the rose. For every film of vapour there is an awaiting fibre of life, and it returns not to its home in the clouds till the vintage glows and the harvest bends. And God's word will at last find the awaiting seed in the hearts it goes forth to seek. It cannot return futile, dishonoured, infructuous. If there is no responsiveness in one man it will pass to another. If the Jew reject it, the Gentile shall prove its beatific power. If it is not welcomed at Nazareth, it passes to Capernaum ; and if Capernaum misses the great occasions of grace, it shall go thence to Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. The word must pass through its determined spheres and cycles of influence, and cannot return to God till it

has accomplished the thing for which God Himself gave it.

The text reminds us there are *providential gradations in the work of the rain and the snow* which are bound up with steps in the development of the seed. "And causeth the earth to bring forth and bud, that there may be seed to the sower and bread to the eater." Perhaps our Lord had this description in His mind whilst speaking the parable of "the blade, the ear, and the full corn in the ear." The word reaches its end through an ordered series of ascending changes. The rain and the snow do not pass into food by a single bound. The dew does not become manna as soon as the earth is touched, nor do the showers fill the empty presses and vats with oil and wine. The influences which descend from the clouds must unite with elements hidden in the soil, and submit to the processes of a protracted alchemy. The iron-bound earth must be subdued, the baked clods softened, the plough must cut its furrow and the sower scatter his seed. And then, after months of waiting, there comes germination, insensible growth, the upthrust blade, and, last of all, the beatitude of ample table and well-filled barn. The seed imposes its own order upon the agencies which quicken it. The wheat of Siberia, where the summer is short, ripens in ninety days, whilst the wheats of milder regions ripen in a hundred and twenty days, and the time-law stamped by long habit upon the seed persists when soil and climate are changed. In some natures the word of God accomplishes its gracious ends swiftly, whilst other natures unfold more slowly and after long discipline

to the genial and gladdening power of the Gospel. It is quicker work to convert a Polynesian or a negro than an Oriental, a more rapid process to evangelise an island race than the ruling castes of a continent. But where the work seems delightfully rapid, and offers an easy test to the faith and patience of the toiler, many gradations must be passed before the full fruits of the Spirit can appear. No link in this living chain can be dropped out. Do not let us lose faith in the efficacy of the word, for it often has to reckon with the time-law stamped by long processes of heredity upon the temperament and the character. It cannot return void. It tarries long to give every heart susceptible to its appeals an ordered time of visitation.

We are reminded by the text that the fruit of these processes is *no less bounteous than sure*. "Seed for the sower, and bread for the eater." The first purpose of the Divine word is to provide for the succession of spiritual life upon the earth. The seed-corn, which means so much for the future, shall not fail. Some labourers in the harvest-fields half fancy that when the snow and the rain have produced no special laurels for their honour and adornment, the dispensation under which they toil has more or less broken down. But these gifts of the clouds have no special mission to cater for human ambition. They will prosper all unselfish effort to meet the religious needs of our contemporaries, and to make good the inheritance of evangelical privilege for posterity. It is perhaps not without meaning that "seed for the sower" should be put before "bread for the eater." God's

word looks forward to the after-time, and whilst it does not forget the needs of the present, its paramount benedictions lie in dim, far-off years. It gives substance to the hopes of all coming spring-times, and prepares for the fruitions of the virgin acres of an unpossessed earth. Religion is not going to die out, however depressing some of the phases through which the human race has to pass. There will be no such dessication of the Lord's harvest-fields as threatens some unhappy districts of the East, which have been denuded of their forests. It is true that in both the temporal and the spiritual sense we may check or increase the rainfall, and so bring to pass either years of leanness or years of plenty, but the rainfall will not cease, and seed-time and harvest will always be. "And bread for the eater." The Divine word will not fail to satisfy the present hunger of the soul for God and righteousness. The continuous message from God meets our deepest wants, together with the wants of those sitting at one table with us, and releases us from all our fears. Is your life parched by drought and threatened with desolation? Do unsatisfied spiritual cravings weaken your strength and fever your blood? Is your soul like a burning desert rather than like a well-watered garden? God still speaks, and His word is rich in refreshment and mystic vitality. What is that word which has its symbol in the snow and the rain? Let the prophet himself answer in the chapter where our text stands. "I will have mercy upon him, and I will abundantly pardon." "Hear, and your soul shall live." "Buy wine and milk without money and without price." "I will make an everlasting

covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.' Such is the word which comes to you, and its virtue cannot fail.

Several years ago a botanist made a careful examination of some plants found in the tombs of Upper Egypt, which had been used as garlands round the heads of mummies. Forty plants, identified with existing species, presented no variation in size or appearance from their present-day representatives. The argument of the paper was for a re-examination of one of the postulates upon which Darwinism is made to rest. To my mind the paper suggested a somewhat different train of thought. How unfailing the fidelity of the rain and the snow, and the stability of all types of vegetable life. In those tombs are found illustrations of lost or forgotten arts. Painter, mason, and builder died, and some of the secrets of their craft passed away with them. The wonderful pyramids are monuments of a civilisation that has ceased to exist. The hands which planted the flowers from which those withered chaplets were woven have long since turned to dust, and the feet that trod in the furrows where the seed of the mummy wheat was sown stiffened in death thousands of years ago. But the vitalising agencies of nature follow the same unresting and ever faithful round. Whilst dynasties pass and races cease to be, rain and snow still fulfil their kindly offices, bringing food and gladness out of the earth upon which they fall. The descendants of the plants from which those blooms were plucked thrive in our gardens to-day, and wheat from the same parent-stock changes to golden ripeness in our fields. The suc-

cession of the life-giving seasons is unbroken. Melting snows still feed the mysterious sources of the Nile, and soft showers still with unwearied patience refresh the gardens and orchards of the enamelled delta, whilst countless generations of men have appeared upon the scene and passed away as a dream when one awaketh. So is it with God's vivifying word. Our civilisations may perish and the glory of our science sink into darkness. The very tradition of our history may drop into a long oblivion, from which it will be partly recovered by curious scholars. But God's word ever continues fruitful, causing righteousness and praise to spring forth before all nations till the end shall come.

Let the word be in us, and may it be our privilege to be channels of its gracious influence to others! "Make the valley full of ditches," said the prophet, and the valleys were filled with waters from unknown springs. Prepare deep, wide, clean pathways for the word, and let it flow in gifts of life to the world.





# THE FORGOTTEN SHEAF

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. GEORGE H. MORRISON, M.A.

“When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it.”—  
DEUT. xxiv. 19.

## VIII

### THE FORGOTTEN SHEAF

THE first thing to impress us in this verse is that God wants to regulate the harvest. It seems at first sight quite a material thing, that toiling with the sickle in the fields. It is hard work, and calls for a strong arm, and does not seem in any sense religious. But for all that, God desires to regulate it. He claims the control even of the harvest-field. When thou cuttest down thy harvest, saith the Lord, do so and so.

Now I think, spite of all the ampler teaching of Jesus Christ, that that is one harvest lesson we still need to learn. We are so ready to break our life up into fragments, and only give God control over a few. When thou worshippest—yes, God shall have His place there. And when thou prayest; perhaps even when thou sufferest. But when thou cuttest down thy harvest, what then, brother? It is not so easy *there* to be obedient. Yet that is true religion—the only religion with any power in it, the only religion that saves us from hypocrisy—to make God coextensive with the life; to interpenetrate it all with Christ. Have you done that—poorly and gropingly—still done it? Or shall it be

to God to-morrow morning—"Thus far shalt Thou come, and no farther"? Ah! it would be a very blessed harvest if some one broke down these barriers to-night. The sunshine streams through the window of the factory no less than through the window of the church! O Light of God! lighten us everywhere!

Our text, then, takes us out into the harvest, and the work of harvesting is nearly done. It is sunset; the waggon is piled with sheaves; the oxen are straining at the collar to get home. The men have been busy in the field since daybreak; now it is cleared, to-morrow for another. But over yonder, where the land dips a little, what is that standing golden in the sunset? Can it be that some sheaf has been forgotten? I can see yet the farmer getting angry. Always these servants—careless, careless! And then his first instinct is to go and fetch it, when God steps in and overrules his instinct by the revelation of a higher law. "Do not go back," says God. "Is it forgotten? I have not forgotten it. Your heart is filled with the question of your granary. My soul is filled with the hunger of the poor." And so the first impulse of the farmer's heart—the instinct of preservation, let me call it—is ruled out of court, conquered, subjugated, by the higher law of love.

Now tell me, do you not feel God's hand in that? I tell you that spirit is abroad and powerful still in a thousand channels where the Divine is flowing. There is an instinct of preservation in the heart—it matters little whether for sheaves or self—there is an impulse *here* to save at every cost; till love at the bidding of God steps in and says, "Forget." And the

beast forgets its natural cowardice in fighting for its litter or for its brood. And the mother forgets her health and all that is selfish in nursing the sick child whom she would die for. And the soldier forgets the burning of his wound as he hands the untouched water to a comrade. And Jesus forgets the natural shrinking of His true humanity, as He goes steadfastly to the cross for you and me! And what is it all? I tell you what it is. It is self swallowed up and lost in love. It is self touched by the hand of love and passing in music out of sight, as says the poet. It is the farmer returning for his sheaf, till the God of love cries on him to halt.

Ah! brother, we shall always grudge the sheaf till the poor and the fatherless and the widow are remembered. It was that new thought, compelling, masterful, that made the farmer go home without a grudge. Think only of the sheaf and we are loth to lose it; think of the starving—and—yes, Lord, let it stand! In other words, it wants a new affection, new vision, new love to God and man, if we are to make these sacrifices in the field, that God is calling from every earnest soul. And that is why, at the very outset of things, Christ says to you and me, "Give me thine heart." Without surrender, sacrifice is hard. It is something external, alien, intrusive. But when God calls me into the love of Jesus, and I see the fatherless and the widow and the strangers *there*, I can leave the sheaf in the field without a murmur, and go singing homeward and restward with my team.

Put in another light, that forgotten sheaf reminds me that there are divine uses in the things which we

forget. There was no question about the remembered sheaves ; they were going to be useful certainly. They would be threshed, and the grain would be sent to the mill, and men would be nourished by that harvest by-and-bye. But the forgotten sheaf, would it not be useless? And it is then that God draws near and whispers "No!" "Ah! child," He says, "you are so apt to think that a thing is useless because you have forgotten it! You are measuring everything by the standards of the barn; you forget that the measurements of heaven are different. A thing is not useless because you forget it. There are divine uses in the things that you forget."

Now there is something you are forgetting to-night. What is it? Tell me. There are some here who are forgetting prayer. There was a time when prayer was very real to you, and a day seemed very empty without prayer; a time when prayer was wrestling and intercession, you were worried and anxious when you could not pray; a time when your first thought after awaking sped like a shaft up to the throne of God! And to-night you have really forgotten prayer.

And there are some here who are forgetting their old dreams, and the high ideals they cherished when they were younger. How brave you were! How scornful of the world! How utterly intolerant of falsehood! How eager to follow the music and the star! But the complexities of life have come, and the intricacies of the city and of business, and a little prosperity, not cheaply bought, God knows; and it is all so real, so tangible, so carnal, you have forgotten the vision and the dream.

And are there not any who have forgotten eternity? 'Twould be a strange congregation if there were not. There was a day when it was very real to you—when you were face to face with it in that bad illness. There was a time when you were driven to think of it, for the grave was open and death was in the house. But life has been full since then : new joys have dawned ; life's music has grown exquisitely sweet ; and you have really forgotten the beyond.

O friend, learn this in harvest—there are divine uses in things that we forget. Prayer is not vain, ideals are not shadows, eternity is not an idle spectre, because they have passed away from *your* horizon. The sheaf you have forgotten, it is God's. The ministry of the eternal love is there. For this is certain, that without some little prayer, and somewhat of the high ideal of Jesus, and something of eternity before us to help us to realise what time is, we can never in any worthy sense help the stranger, or have the blessing of God upon our work.

One other thought the forgotten sheaf suggests to me—it is the apparent wastefulness of love. I am certain that if Mr. Worldly Wiseman had been there, standing and criticising over the hedge—I am certain he would have gone home quite angry to his wife at what he would call this farmer's wastefulness. "To think of him leaving a sheaf out in his field ; and in these hard times too, when farmers are always grumbling. And there could be no question that he saw it. I actually saw him turn round and look at it." So to that worldly wisdom by the hedge it looked an extravagant, prodigal, wasteful kind of

thing. But it was *not* that in the eyes of God. It was only the apparent wastefulness of love. Does that suggest no other scene to you? I am carried in an instant to the Lord Jesus Christ and the woman who is bowing at His feet. And see! she is breaking the alabaster box, and it is full of very precious ointment; and she anoints the Saviour's feet with it, and the whole house is redolent. And His disciples murmur and are indignant. "To what purpose is this waste?" they whisper. It is like the action of the Jewish farmer, an extravagant and prodigal squandering. But "Let her alone," says Jesus, "why trouble ye the woman?" He saw that it spelled out love, and He was happy. It was not wasteful in any real sense. It was the uncalculating way of love.

And it was that way that saved us, brother. It was that very way that Jesus trod when He went straight to Calvary and the grave. Love never asks how little can I do; it always asks how much. Love never stops to haggle and to bargain; it gives itself—all, passionately, utterly. Men call it waste; perhaps so it is, I know not. But it was just what Jesus did for you and me. Less might have saved us; less might have saved the world. One drop of the infinitely precious blood had done it. But when I see it all poured out so royally—shed like a fountain without a thought of self—I do not only feel God is a Saviour, I feel at the back of all that God is love! Perhaps God was leading the world like a child to that, when He taught the lesson of the forgotten sheaf!



HARVEST LESSONS FROM THE  
FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. GEORGE MILLIGAN, D.D.

· And they did all eat, and were filled.”—MARK vi. 42.

## IX

### HARVEST LESSONS FROM THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

IT was on a grassy plain to the north-east of the Sea of Galilee that this miracle was worked. You remember what had brought Jesus and His disciples thither. Shortly before Jesus had heard of the cruel death of His great forerunner John the Baptist, and He could not but desire to mourn in secret for one whose faithfulness to his Divine mission had caused his tragic end. The disciples, too, were in want of rest and quiet. They had lately returned from their first missionary journey, and the success which had attended their efforts had made them excited, it may be even a little presumptuous and vain. They must have time to think over all that had passed, and to realize that it was only in humble dependence upon God's aid that they could work at all. And so Jesus had bade them "Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile."

But the rest which both Master and disciples needed so much was denied them. A great multitude, who had lately been attracted by Jesus' teaching and miracles, had noticed His departure, and,

guessing whither He was gone, had run round by the north end of the lake, and were waiting on the shore to receive Him as He landed from the boat. And He, notwithstanding His own weariness, was touched and encouraged by the sight. He knew only too well, indeed, the motives that had brought many there—the idle curiosity, the love for wonders, the desire to share in the material blessings He had shown Himself able to bestow—but all the more “He was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and He began to teach them many things” (*v.* 34). All day He was so occupied; but as evening drew on a new difficulty arose. The people were far from their homes: in the excited journey of the morning they had neglected to bring food with them: and the place was desert. How could they be fed?

St. Mark and the other Synoptists represent the disciples as first bringing this difficulty under the notice of Jesus, and suggesting the dismissal of the multitude to the villages round about that they might buy themselves bread. But Jesus had no such wish, no such intention. “They need not depart,” He said, “give ye them to eat.” And then setting aside the disciples’ calculation of the amount of bread that would be required, He bade them go and see for themselves how many loaves they had. It was not at first sight an encouraging report that they brought back: “Five, and two fishes.” In the hands of the disciples such a supply was indeed as nothing; but in the hands of Christ what might it not effect? And so the command went forth, “Make the men

sit down." And they sat down, the men first, according to the Eastern custom, so strange to our Western ideas, while the women and children stood apart. Like flower-beds they looked, St. Mark tells us,—in one of his characteristic graphic touches, showing that he had received his account from an eyewitness,—in their bright Oriental robes of red and blue and yellow, against the green grass (*v.* 40). And then taking the five loaves and two fishes, Jesus "looked up to heaven and blessed"; and after breaking the bread and dividing the fishes, He distributed them to the disciples, who in their turn distributed them to the people. "And they did all eat, and were filled." And not only so, but they gathered up twelve baskets of fragments—pieces broken by our Lord and not distributed, too precious therefore to be lost.

Such is the miracle, and so great was the significance attached to it in the Early Church, that it is interesting to notice that it alone of our Lord's miracles (with the exception of His Resurrection) is narrated by all the four Evangelists. Nor can we fail to perceive how wide and varied that significance is. We might think of the miracle, for example, as marking the culminating point of Christ's Galilean ministry, the popularity of which from that moment began to decline, when, checking the people's enthusiasm aroused by it, He would not permit them to take Him and make Him a king. Or we might think of it in connection with His person, as affording sure evidence of His Divine claims. Or, comparing it with His other miracles, we might notice how, while miracles of power, they were primarily also miracles

of mercy and love. But in the special circumstances in which we are met to-day, shall we not think of it rather as bringing home to us the great truth of Divine providence—that it is God who supplies our daily wants, no less truly than through His Son He supplied the wants of the hungry multitude in the wilderness? For it is not only in what we are accustomed to call miracles that God works. The whole course of Nature is one continual miracle. And in the golden corn with which our stackyards and barns are so abundantly filled, we have a witness to the same power, only differently applied, that multiplied the loaves and the fishes. What then, regarded from this point of view, may this miracle teach us? What are some of the harvest lessons that we may gather from the manner in which we find Christ here working?

# I

*One truth undoubtedly is that Christ, even while putting forth supernatural power, did not wholly disregard human means.*

He did not create the food out of nothing, or transform the stones of the wilderness into the loaves and fishes. No! He began, as we have seen, by asking the disciples what loaves they had. And it was out of their humble store that the necessary food was provided.

And so still. If we cannot be reminded too often that it is upon God that we are dependent for the supply of our temporal as well as our spiritual mercies, and that in Him, in the widest sense of the

words, we "live, and move, and have our being" (Acts xvii. 28), no less is it true that God requires us to use to the utmost the powers and opportunities He has placed within our reach. These may be often very poor and insignificant in themselves, but it is not thus that God regards them. It is enough for Him that they are ours, and that by our faithful use of them His great task in our support and maintenance is accomplished.

For, to appeal to a very simple illustration that most naturally occurs to us to-day, as we look at a sheaf of corn, what does it represent? First and foremost doubtless God's bounty. "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (Psalm xxiv. 1). He it is who has visited the earth and watered it; who has prepared corn for His people, when He has so provided for it; who has crowned the year with His goodness, and whose paths drop fatness (Psalm lxxv. 9, 11.) But none the less is it true that, in the production of that sheaf, man has had his part to play. It was by his hands that the ground was broken up, that it might be in the fittest state for receiving the precious seed; by him that the seed was sown; and by him again that in the time of harvest the work of ingathering was accomplished. The old law still holds good: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" (Gen. iii. 19); or, as it was rendered by the Christian Apostle, "If any will not work, neither shall he eat" (2 Thess. iii. 10).

Nor is this all, but *the extent* of our provision is to a larger degree than we often realize again dependent upon ourselves. We cannot, of course,

forget that there are years when, for reasons we may not be able to understand, but which, we may be sure, are wise and good, God visits our land with prolonged drought or continuous rain, and so disappoints man's utmost endeavours and hopes. But in general is it not the case that honest, faithful toil brings with it its own reward, and not only so, but a reward proportionate to the amount of toil expended? "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly," but "he which soweth bountifully"—doing the best he can for his land, showing himself most careful in the selection of his seeds, and scattering them most freely—"shall reap also bountifully" (2 Cor. ix. 6).

Why is it that we are so slow to learn that in all departments of life the more we give—of our time, of our labour, of our means—the more there is added unto us? "What is it that ye have?" Christ is still saying; "bring it unto Me." And once we have consecrated to Him our own few poor loaves and fishes, He causes that we shall be supplied with "so much bread."

## II

*But a further preparation was required of the multitude in our story. No sooner were the loaves and fishes placed in Jesus' hands, than He "commanded that all should sit down by companies upon the green grass."*

And when we try to recall to ourselves the scene, it is not difficult to understand the reason. All



before had evidently been noise, confusion, bustle, the people gathering themselves into little knots, eagerly discussing the day's events, and wondering what Christ was to do next, and what was to become of themselves and their families in that desert place. And as the whisper began to go round that Christ had evidently some great miracle in view, can we not understand how the excitement would increase, and everywhere there would be an eager hurrying to and fro on the part of the multitude to bring themselves within reach of the promised food? But then it was, out of the midst of some such tumultuous, assertive crowd, that the calm voice of Jesus bade the disciples who were nearest to Him "Make the men sit down." And immediately we can see them passing from group to group, arguing with this one, rebuking that, everywhere making known their Master's will, until at length five thousand men were quietly seated on the grass. Then, and not till then, were they ready to be fed.

And so, to apply the lesson, it is this same quiet, trustful, receptive attitude that is still required of us in view of God's supply of our daily wants. Our sheaf of corn again makes this clear. For if, as we have just been seeing, there must be labour in spring and labour in harvest, it is also true that between these two seasons there is a long period when the husbandman can do little more than wait in patience for the precious fruits of the earth. It is to this period, you will remember, that our Lord refers in one of His most striking parables, when He compares the kingdom of God to a man who "should cast seed into the ground; and should

## 110 FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how" (St. Mark iv. 26-29). The labourer has done his part; he has now to leave it to God to do His; for no efforts of his own will hasten by a day the ripening of the grain, or make it more fit for the use for which God has designed it.

It is a truth we would do well to lay to heart, for not only does it cut at the root of that over-fearful, over-anxious spirit which characterizes so many people's relations to their Heavenly Father, but it also rebukes that feverish haste with which so much of our work is apt to be marred. We require more rest, more calm, more of that quietness and confidence in which alone true strength is to be found.

The world is too much with us,  
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.

And it is necessary that we should be reminded that, if there are times for bringing forth, there are also times for sitting down, and that only when we do sit down in the trustful, receptive spirit which that attitude implies, can the food which God has provided be extended to us.

### III

*Yet one other truth we may learn from our miracle.  
It was in thanksgiving that the miracle originated*

"And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, He [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to His

disciples to set before them; and the two fishes divided He among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled." And the importance that was attached to this act of blessing or thanksgiving is shown not only by the emphasis which each of the Evangelists lays upon it in his narrative, but in the fact that in referring to the scene long after St. John expressly describes it as "the place where they did eat bread, after that the Lord had given thanks" (John vi. 23). It was that that stood out in the Apostle's memory; and it did so all the more doubtless because, as has been suggested,<sup>1</sup> of its contrast with his own and his brother-disciples' then frame of mind. They had been "uneasy, alarmed, and not a little miserable; but Jesus was grateful and glad." He saw even in that scanty store His Father's gift, and knew that God could as easily feed the five thousand as make the five loaves; and so He *blessed*.

It is an example, again, we would do well to follow. We all know how apt we are to take what comes to us as a matter of course, or as due solely to our own merits and exertions. Or when we do approach God with regard to the things of our daily lives, is it not principally in the attitude of suppliants? But while we ask, let us not forget also to praise. It is the natural and becoming attitude in view of the great things that God has done for us: it carries with it the pledge of future mercies.

One thing at least is certain. This feeling of thankfulness can hardly fail to be uppermost in our hearts to-day. God has blessed our land with an

<sup>1</sup> Professor Denney, *Gospel Questions and Answers*.

abundant harvest. All has been secured and well secured. Do we not do well then to lift our hearts in special praise to Him "who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" (1 Tim. vi. 17), and from whom cometh down "every good gift and every perfect gift" (James i. 17)?

"The Lord is good to all: and His tender mercies are over all His works. . . . The eyes of all wait upon Thee; and Thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest Thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing. . . . My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord: and let all flesh bless His holy name for ever and ever" (Psalm cxlv. 9, 15, 16, 21).

THE ARK IN THE HARVEST-  
FIELD OF BETH-SHEMESH

*Harvest Festival Sermon*

By Rev. HUGH MACMILLAN, D.D., LL.D.

“And they of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley: and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the ark, and rejoiced to see it.”—1 SAMUEL vi. 13.

## X

### THE ARK IN THE HARVEST-FIELD OF BETH-SHEMESH

A SHORT distance north from Aviemore, on the Grainish Moor, beside the highroad, there is a remarkable Druidical temple, small but wonderfully complete. It consists of two circles of standing stones, an inner and an outer circle, respectively twenty-four and sixty feet in diameter, the stones projecting about three or four feet above the ground. This ancient monument has a hoary appearance alike in the misty gloom and in the brilliant sunshine. Close beside it on the moor there is a little Presbyterian church—in which the people of the district meet for worship at stated times—constructed so recently, that it has not had time to acquire the grey hue of the surrounding stones and walls that have been long exposed to the weather. There cannot be a greater contrast than between these two shrines of religion. The one a temple of Nature-worship, in which our forefathers looked up in reverence to the natural sun, and allowed his rays to penetrate into every part of the unroofed structure; the other a temple of revealed religion, raised in honour of the Sun who made the sun, the

True Light of the world, whose coming has dispelled all the darkness of superstition and idolatry. What strange thoughts are awakened in the mind by the near proximity of these two alien sanctuaries; the one the fulfilment and explanation of all the dumb unconscious hopes and vague yearnings and aspirations of the other—the revelation of the unknown God, after whom our ancestors groped in their blindness, and ignorantly worshipped! The faith of the Church has superseded the faith of the Druidical temple and made it extinct; and now the temple is only a prehistoric memorial of times of ignorance that God winked at.

In Bible lands there was an equally strange association of the sanctuary of the living God with a heathen place of worship. Beth-shemesh, on the borders of Judah, to which the Ark of the Lord had been brought from the country of the Philistines, enclosed in a chest, and borne in a cart by milch cows miraculously guided to the spot, was a place of hoary memories. It was a primitive shrine of worship long before the Israelites had entered Canaan under Joshua. The original races of the land used to pour libations in honour of the sun upon a great Stone, which stood in the midst of the cornfields; and many a Beltane fire had been kindled at the base of this large boulder in connection with the worship of the sun on the first day of May, and many a harvest-dance had been performed around it at the close of summer, in gratitude for the rich return of the fields. And now the villagers of Beth-shemesh were busy at their harvest, girded



for toil, and bedewed with the sweat of labour. They looked up and saw the strange spectacle, the cart drawn by the cows without a driver coming towards them, and they shouted with joy when they recognised the returning Ark of the Lord. Combining the old religion of the place with the Hebrew faith as the covenant-people, they took the Ark and laid it upon the great stone of Abel; and there they kindled a sacred fire, and offered the cart and the chest that contained the ark, and the cows that had brought them thither, as a burnt sacrifice to the God of Israel. This they felt was the final appreciation of heaven. The sacred ceremony consecrated the place to the service of God, and purified it from all its pagan memories. The altar of sun worship became, through the resting of the Ark upon it, the sanctuary of the living and true God; and they rejoiced in the presence of the venerable relic, as the first pledge of returning hope for the land.

The association of the Ark of God with the ripe harvest-fields of Beth-shemesh is a most interesting circumstance. It was no mere accident, but a providential design. He who miraculously guided the instinct of the cows led them hither with their sacred burden, to teach a great lesson. The people saw standing among the golden sheaves a holy relic, covered with the wings of the golden cherubim, and flashing back in the rays of the sun. They rejoiced because they knew that it was the symbol of the Divine presence and power, and that wherever it rested it was a token for good to the people round

about. They felt that in it God had come out from behind the veil of Nature and revealed Himself in visible form. As an object of worship it was much more satisfactory than the sun that used to be adored on the spot. The sun was high above them, overpowering and inaccessible in its glory ; but the Ark was beside them, and they could gaze upon its beauty undazzled. The sun was after all but a creature ; but here was the Creator, God over all, blessed forever, the Light that made the light. Within it was preserved the miraculous manna, as a continual testimony in God's name to the power and goodness of Divine providence, as a memorial to all generations of the faithfulness of the harvest-covenant. And therefore when times of famine came, they could pray to God for food with greater confidence, when they remembered that the manna was in the Ark of God, laid up there by God's own command, as a pledge that bread should be given to His people, and that there should be no want to those who feared Him. He was not too high to be indifferent to the physical wants of His creatures ; He was not so powerless as to be unable to help them if the blight or drought destroyed their harvest. In ancient times He had remembered the hunger of their fathers in the wilderness, and the windows of heaven had been opened to supply them with bread. And now the Ark of this living and true God, with the sacrament of the manna contained in it, had come into the midst of their cornfields at the very time that they were reaping the harvest, to proclaim the great truth to them that not to the sun, nor any power of Nature, but to the God of Nature, the God of heaven and

earth, they owed the golden riches of their harvest-fields. It was His blessing that enabled them to reap with joy what they had sown in tears.

The sacred Ark was associated with the most marvellous events in the history of the covenant-people. It accompanied them throughout their desert wanderings. Morning after morning it was lifted up and carried forth, and the watchword rang through the hosts, "Let God arise, and let his enemies be scattered." And every night, at the close of a weary march, the Ark was lowered and deposited in its resting-place, and the evening hymn went up, "Return, O God, unto the many thousands of Israel!" Usually placed for security in the centre of the host, it passed to the front of the great procession during the crossing of the Jordan, and opened a wondrous door in the midst of the waters, and held it open through the long day, until every man, woman, and child in the vast host had safely crossed over to the other side. God blessed the land of Israel because of the presence of the Ark at Shiloh, as He blessed the house of Obed-Edom for the same reason. Its yearly harvests multiplied under the beneficent shadow of the venerable relic. But in the days of Eli, on account of the wickedness of the people, the Ark ceased to shield them from harm and to be a source of blessing to them. And when they took it down with them into the fight against the Philistines, expecting it to act like a charm or fetich, their want of faith in the living God deprived it of all power: it suffered itself to be taken by the heathen. But even in captivity, humbled although it

was, it still was the symbol of God's glory, and crushed the idols of the heathen before it and visited its captors with plagues and chastisements. And now that its captivity is over, and it is returning in triumph to its own land and people, there is great rejoicing among the harvest folk of Beth-shemesh, because, as I have said, they knew that it was bringing peace and prosperity with it to the country that had been so long desolate without it.

It was a remarkable transition from the bloody battlefield to the peaceful harvest-home; from the destruction of its foes to the blessing of its friends; from scattering disease and death among the heathen, to spreading a table richly furnished with food for the covenant-people. In that quiet harvest-field the Ark was the true place of power. It wrought a greater miracle in the ripening of the wheat, which the villagers of Beth-shemesh were busy cutting down with their sickles, than when it parted the waters of the Jordan, or broke in pieces the idols of the Philistines. In the childhood of the world it was an object-lesson, teaching by their senses a rude and ignorant people who could not be taught in any other way. They needed to see in some visible, tangible form the object of their faith and worship; and God accommodated Himself to their narrow capacities, and brought His Ark into their cornfields as a sacrament of spiritual realities, as a sign to show them that it was the God of Israel, their own covenant God, who was giving them the harvest they were reaping. As they gazed upon it, they thought of the old servant of God who had

guided and fed their fathers—of that Moses in whom they believed, and who had given them strong proofs that he had a commission from God. And though it was but a partial understanding, which the people of Beth-shemesh had, of the truths taught by the presence of the Ark in their harvest-field, and they saw only a little way into the mystery of the Divine provision for human food, still, what they did understand filled their hearts with joy.

We can trace a progressive method in God's revelation of Himself as the God of the harvest. At first His connection with it seemed a lofty and distant one. It was from the height of heaven that He gave the covenant-promise that seed-time and harvest should never cease, and He sealed it with the rainbow spanning the clouds with its arch of prismatic light. Then He came nearer, and the Ark containing the memorial manna passed through the ripe harvest-fields, and consecrated the reaping of the golden sheaves. Then He came nearer still, and in the form of Emmanuel, God with us, He walked through the cornfields of Galilee on the Sabbath day, and talked with His disciples as they plucked the ears and broke their fast, making a silent gospel of that cornfield. And nearer still, when He bade the famished multitude sit down on the green grass in the desert place, and the slow seasons' work was done at once, and bread that never knew the curse of human toil grew swiftly as it passed from hand to hand along the hungry ranks. By these successive revelations of Himself in connection with our bread, God claims in a very peculiar sense to be the

giver of it, and claims that in a peculiar sense the "gift" is a sacred one.

It seemed easy in the childhood of the world to see the Ark of God in the harvest-fields, outshining the golden sunbeams, outmarvelling the glory of the arching sky. These were the ages of faith, when heaven lay very near to the earth, and angelic visitants might step down from the shining ladder at any time. The lives of the people were very simple and close to Nature. The cultivation of the soil was the work in which all were engaged; and the joy of harvest was the great typical joy of life. The idyl of Ruth was a mirror of the primitive manners of the people; and the greeting of Boaz and his reapers in the cornfields of Bethlehem, "The Lord be with you," and their hearty response, "The Lord bless thee," was a specimen of the beautiful piety and brotherhood of the times. It was natural for such an age to recognise the God of Israel, as the giver of the golden riches of the harvest-field, and to feel grateful to Him for His acceptable gifts. Their dependence upon the fruits of the soil was so direct and immediate, that they seemed to have received them straight out of God's own hand. But it is very different with us in these modern days. The heavens have removed far up above our heads, and we feel God's home to be now too distant. This is a scientific age, in which the supernatural is discredited. The favourite doctrine of evolution is too commonly interpreted and accepted, not as God's method of working in Nature, but as a scheme to get rid of His working altogether; as if Nature sufficed

for itself, and was able to carry on all its operations without a personal Creator to originate, or a living Providence to control. Regularity and uniformity have had their usual effect, and what takes place always seems too easily imagined as if it took place of itself. All these materialistic conceptions of the world in which we live have succeeded in banishing the Ark of God from the harvest-field, as an incongruous and superfluous object, an archaic and effete relic of superstition.

Then, too, so many live in towns and cities nowadays, where they are widely separated from the cultivation of the soil, and do not depend upon it directly for income or subsistence. No one in our large towns grows a single boll of meal by his own labour. And more than this, our country as a whole, its rural as well as its urban parts, is made independent of the produce of the harvest-field, by its trade with our colonies and other foreign lands, which send to us the surplus of their abundance. Our home soil, even in the most favourable years, does not grow a third of what is required to feed the multitude of our people ; and to make up for the vast deficiency the harvests of the world are borne in ships to our shores. The artificial and complicated arrangements connected with this commerce take away the old feeling of dependence and interest that we had in the harvest. We no longer watch over our agricultural operations with the eagerness of anxiety, neither do we regard them with the old religious feeling. The beautiful archaic customs connected with the harvest-field have vanished.

The growing of our food is becoming more and more a mechanical process, and the harvest-field a manufactory. Steam engines and iron implements of all kinds, to facilitate the sowing and the reaping, destroy the pastoral simplicity of labour, and separate the work as much as possible from the worker, giving him comparatively little interest in what is purely a mechanical task. There is no joy in the harvest-toil, no exhilaration in the harvest-home. The corn is brought to the stackyards like manufactured goods to a warehouse, and the harvest-fields become like our manufacturing centres, unattractive and unlovable. All the old superstitious rites associated with the harvest-home, the fair humanities of old religion, relics of a far-off time when men devoutly believed that they owed the fruits of the soil to the good-will of the higher powers, have been given up nearly everywhere. In such circumstances the Ark of God is apt to disappear before the reaping machine "maazing the blessed fields," as the rude Northern Farmer put it, who, if he had little reverence for the things of the church, felt in his inmost soul the unconscious religion of the soil.

What we need, then, is to have our eyes lifted up from material things and purged with the spiritual eye-salve of faith, that we may see the Ark of God standing in our harvest-field. Each autumn, with the pot of manna within it as the pledge of God's faithfulness to His great world-covenant, that seed-time and harvest shall never cease, it passes this way with unfailing regularity, more precious than the golden sheaves, more glorious



than the autumn sunshine. And if the prosperity of the harvest is no longer the absorbing question among all classes of the community, from the highest to the lowest, that it used to be ; if we have found in our experience that the world is ready to supply us with bread—if we provide gold for the purpose—at a cheaper rate than we could grow it ourselves, still not the less, but all the more, do we need to feel that the Ark of God is in the harvest-field, in our own and in that of others. More than any other nation on earth do we need to be reminded every season that, in spite of all our vast trade and commerce, and the thoroughness of the arrangements we have made for bringing the harvests of other lands to our doors, and the seeming stability of the breakwaters we have built against the storms of fortune, we have not succeeded in emancipating ourselves from all dependence upon Him who is the Lord of the harvest, and becoming a providence to ourselves. We are still as much exposed to the uncertainties of the seasons, and the alternations of hope and anxiety connected with them, as were our forefathers before steam was invented. For, drawing our supplies as we do from a hundred sources, spread over a very large area of the earth's surface, we only multiply our dependencies and expose ourselves to greater risks of failure. We have to widen our horizon and broaden our outlook ; for to place the bread upon our tables every day, not only must the seasons be favourable in our own country, but also through the wide domains of Canada and Australia. The Ark of God must pass through all the harvest-fields of the great world ; the rainbow arch of promise must

span all the lands of the earth, in order that our wants in this distant isle of the sea may be supplied.

The presence of the Ark makes the harvest-field holy ground. There all the benign agents of Nature, the sun and the shower, the dew and the breeze, have combined to ripen its produce. There all the seasons have co-operated to bring about the beneficent result. As God talked with our first parents among the trees of the primeval garden ; as He communed with the High Priest of Israel in his representative character at the mercy-seat, from between the cherubim, in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, so there among the golden sheaves of the harvest-field God meets with man, and man meets with God. There we pray as in a sanctuary, and ask our Heavenly Father with filial confidence to give us our daily bread, as if we had it not, as if it came direct from His hand, as if we ignored altogether the part we ourselves have to perform in producing and earning it. There we realise that in this great operation man's part is trifling compared with God's ; for without His power and blessing the fields would yield no meat ; the beneficent operations of Nature would be frustrated ; the arrangements and conditions of human society would be so disordered that, even if there were food, it would fail in many instances in reaching its proper destination ; and the bread itself would minister disease and weakness, and not health and strength.

There, as in the Temple of old, we are summoned, like the covenant-people, to present the

first-fruits of the harvest before the Lord in thankfulness and praise ; remembering that we are thereby pledged to employ no part of the produce in the work of sin, but, on the contrary, to employ the leisure, the health, the strength, the blessings which the harvest gives us, in the service of God. There, as the harvest unites us more closely to God, so it unites us more closely to one another, as the children of one family, sitting at one table, provided by the same loving Father ; and we deeply feel that it is because God fulfils His great promise to us, we can fulfil any transaction or bargain with one another. For all the commerce and business of life are based upon the growth of the corn, upon the primeval promise that seed-time and harvest shall never cease ; and all the other riches in the world, failing the riches of our harvest-fields, were as worthless as the false notes of the forger. And, finally, the Ark of God in our harvest-fields brings forcibly to our minds the close connection of our daily bread with the salvation of our souls. Christ purchased with His own blood the necessities of life as well as the blessings of grace from the forfeiture of the Fall, and bestows them upon all who believe as covenant blessings. Received and used in faith, we remember how they were forfeited and how they are restored. They are memorials of our sin and of our redemption ; and they come to us filtered and strained from all the evils and disabilities of sin, and sweetened with the blessing that maketh truly rich, and with which no sorrow is added.



# A PLEA FOR PERSEVERANCE

Harvest Festival Sermon

By E. GRIFFITH-JONES, B.A.

“In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand : for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”—ECCLES. xi. 6.

## XI

### A PLEA FOR PERSEVERANCE

#### I

WE are all accustomed to the analogy that exists between the sowing of seed in the ground and the operation of moral and spiritual influences in the human heart. In these words, however, we have an aspect of the question which is seldom considered, and which yet lies very near to the practical problems of life. It would not be too much perhaps to say that the principle I wish to expound has been studiously ignored by many religious teachers. All the more reason why we should face it frankly, and take its message to heart.

Let me explain. The aspect of seed-sowing and harvest time which is usually emphasised is the certainty of the result. And this truth is clearly, we might almost say lovingly, taught in Scripture. It is referred to as a promise from the beginning of things and reaching to the end: "Seed-time and harvest shall not fail so long as the earth endureth." It is given forth as a principle that is as true of the spiritual as of the physical universe: "For as the rain cometh down and the snow from heaven, and

returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, and giveth seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall my word be that goeth out of my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that whereto I sent it." It is uttered as a great law of the moral life in the form of a solemn warning to individuals: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." And conversely we find it in the form of an encouragement to all who are trying, amid many difficulties, to do their best for God and man: "Let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due time we shall reap, if we faint not."

And yet, beautiful and encouraging as this is, it is only half the truth. The certainty of the harvest in the broad sense is true. But this certainty is made up of a number of uncertainties. Putting it mathematically, it is the resultant of an immense number of variables; these variables, in the long run, correcting each other, so that the issue is safe. Putting it popularly, you are practically sure that if you sow you shall reap; but of each handful of seed, each patch of corn, you cannot be sure "which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." The grand result is safe; the details are quite uncertain. And as this fact also reappears in the spiritual life, and forms one of its most pressing difficulties, and often one of its most insistent trials, it behoves us not to forget it.



## II

If, in the time of sowing, the husbandman were to take a corn-seed in his hands as he sent it forth on its adventurous career, and were to apostrophise it, it would have to be thus: "I send thee into the soil in the hope that thou wilt germinate and send forth thy blade, and come to the full ear, and bear thy thirty-fold or thy sixtyfold or thy hundredfold. But, alas! what chances are against thee! The soil may be shallow or barren; insects may devour thee; thorns may choke thee; the careless foot may crush thee; frost may kill thee, mildew blight thee, storms lay thee low, drought and fierce heat starve and destroy thee. In hope I sow thee, but certainty that thou wilt survive have I none!"

That is to say, all living things have not only to put forth their possibilities under the normal stimulus of Nature, but they have to meet such uncertain conditions, such abnormalities of environment, that their ultimate survival is the issue of a severe conflict. This is so severe indeed that only a fraction of the seeds actually sown come to perfection, only a small proportion of the creatures born survive; whether in the vegetable or animal or human world, the chances at the start of any single living process are many times against its coming into ripe perfection. Sowing seeds, therefore, in the hope of reaping the fruit of those particular seeds is an act of faith; it is a venture, a leap in the dark, an enterprise of which no man can see the issue beforehand. Financiers may discount the prospects of any particular year's output on the whole, and speculate on the chances of the harvest

here or there or yonder ; but it is speculation, not certainty : they know not " which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

### III

This "natural law" follows us into the spiritual life. There too is a mixture of certainty and uncertainty—certainty as to the broad issue, uncertainty as to the fate of individual efforts and outputs of influence. " Fear not, little flock," was the Master's brave words, in the day of His own seed-sowing ; " it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." But here too we sow in faith and in hope ; of all our acts of service in the name of Christ, it is true that we know not " which shall prosper, this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

We are accustomed to the broad statement that no particle of good influence, no kind action wrought for here, no word fitly spoken, no single effort put forth in the name of God can fail of its full result. This is one of those half-truths that breed bitterness as well as disappointment because of its ambiguity. We are bound to believe that all true effort put forth in the name of God must go to swell the current of His redeeming purpose. It tells as the grain of sand tells on the seashore, as the wave tells on the mighty ocean. But if we are asked to believe that every attempt to do good succeeds in its own right, as it were, and without reference to the general plan, then the evidence is against such an idea. It is not true as a matter of fact.

Consider the vast amount of effort sent forth by

men and women in the name of Christ from year to year. How much of it definitely succeeds in its purpose? Think of that continuous output of effort and prayer and holy influence that has been streaming forth, century after century, out of the lives of good people from the beginning of the Christian era. Has it fulfilled the hopes of those who first set it flowing? Even remembering that the world has to be reconverted afresh in every generation, can we say that the course of our historic faith is, so far, very encouraging? Think of the vast tracts of the world's surface that were once Christianised and have since lapsed into heathenism, or have been swept by floods of Mohammedanism, or grown weedy with superstitious growths of Christianity. Think of the ebb as well as flow that marks every missionary campaign, and the slow advance that is being made in the face of the immemorial usages, the obstinate superstitions, the appalling sensuality and greed and coarseness of savage tribes, as the Gospel beats on the rocky shores of their lives and slowly wears down their insensate opposition to its appeal. Think of the condition of Christian countries to-day—of the militarism, the avarice, the materialism, the scepticism, the sensuality that prevails, and the rage of revolt we often see against the holy law of God, as revealed in His Son and in the Book of books. Does it look as though we had won the battle? that the reaping is proportionate to the sowing?

Look nearer home. Every church is a seed-bed, in which a perpetual sowing is going on. There is the preaching of the Word; there is the Sunday School, with its faithful instruction continued for

long years ; there are the many organisations for uplifting and bettering the community all around. Are we satisfied with the result of what we are doing ? Is it commensurate with the sacrifice, the generous consecration of time, and money, and strength which are expended so freely for the result ? How many sermons hit their mark ? How many of your Sunday scholars of ten years ago are to-day sincere Christians ? How much passionate prayer and wise, persistent effort is being offered up in the name and for the love of Christ before we secure one soul for Him ?

Come nearer still. What of our own families ? There is no sphere in which so much devoted, gracious, self-forgetful sacrifice is freely made for the good of others as in the home. What prayers are offered up for these little ones ! What days of effort and nights of anxiety are spent in their behalf ! How men and women, not otherwise remarkable for their goodness, become virtuous, noble, even pious, simply in order that their influence on their children may be high and holy ! Why, if every effort we put forth in the way of good influence were sure of its reward, would there be a libertine, a rascal, a sensualist, a God-forgetful man in the world in the next generation ? And yet how many parents, whose life has been a passionate gift of love to their children, have had to confess at last that they seem to have failed altogether, and that their prayers and endeavours and discipline have been fruitless in securing the result they aimed at ? Granted that many of the best-meaning people are most short-sighted and futile in their treatment of their children,

and show zeal in inverse proportion to their insight in dealing with them, it still remains that the wisest training sometimes fails, and that some parents, at the close of a long life of devotion, are driven back on the last defences of faith in trying to bear the bitter disappointment of their dearest hopes. In all these relations it is as true of the world of souls as of the world of seeds—"thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

#### IV

Of course the reason for this is simple. Good influence is like seed sown in an alien soil. It is cast into the midst of hostile forces; it is surrounded by them every step of the way; it has to fight with them in a death-grip all along the line and to the very end. At present this is not God's world: it is a world that He is engaged in winning back to Himself; it is a world crossed in every direction by currents of contrary forces; and though ultimately the issue is clear, it is an issue that must still involve immense sacrifices and repulses by the way. We do not yet "see all things subjected to him." In the end

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Doth his successive journeys run,

but He has a great and vigilant and resourceful enemy to conquer, and the end is not yet.

#### V

Now, why do I put all this before you this morning, at this Harvest Festival?

This, for two reasons :

First, that we may all realise the true nature of spiritual seed-sowing, and steer clear of false ideas and false expectations. Many good people seem to live in a spiritual fool's paradise, in which everything is supposed to be all right with the best possible kind of world. It is a good thing sometimes to undeceive ourselves and force our eyes to look on things as they are, and not as we should like them to be. And the facts are as I have tried to tell you.

Secondly, and chiefly, that I may point out the duty which these facts point to.

When we first realise these facts as they are, the natural result is discouragement. Sometimes the workers give up in despair at the utter apparent failure of their work, and I have known cases where their personal faith has also been completely obscured. They think of their long years of futile labour, of the effort and thought and prayer they seem to have expended so largely in vain, and they feel as though they had been tricked. They had a right to expect better results. Perhaps this sorrow comes home with more painful bitterness to parents whose home training has for some mysterious reason failed than to any others. Deep and tender sympathy should be shown to all who are passing through this experience.

But my point is this—that the uncertainty of particular efforts, this or that, for the sake of Christ and the souls He died to save, so far from discouraging those who work in His name, should be one of their chief incentives to increased effort. This is exactly the teaching of this text.

What does the wise man say in view of the uncertainty of the husbandman's calling? "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand : for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." That is to say, the farmer, just because he does not know what will become of this or that handful of seed, makes it a reason *not* for discouragement, but for redoubled effort. The more the uncertainty, the greater the industry, and the more assiduous the toil and determination to succeed.

In this the farmer is the true disciple of the great Husbandman. Foolish people sometimes speak of the waste there is in Nature. Prodigal abundance is certainly there ; waste there is none. Nature provides for contingencies. As the chances are against this seed and that seed, she produces a dozen, a score, a hundred ; she wraps these up in all manner of cunning ways, covering them with rind, pulp, shell, integument, in order to be sure that, if one or two or a dozen fail, then there are plenty more to step into the breach,—so that in some way or other there may be no doubt of the result at last. And if only one seed out of a hundred survives at last, all the ninety and nine that have failed go to enrich the soil and make it grow finer and fuller, so that it may bring forth an "hundredfold."

Dear comrades in the Lord's work—whether your sphere be the home or the school, the mission hall or the church at large—let this be your method too. We are engaged in a great and arduous, but most honourable work. We are sowing seed not for time but for eternity. We have many enemies,—here and

there and everywhere they crop up and thwart us. The stubbornness of the human heart; the long, strong, wiry pull of temptation on weak souls; the ever-present and resourceful methods of the evil one, as he sows tares among the wheat; and a hundred other things to boot, are against us. And they will not suffer us to have our own way if they can. Shall this discourage and throw us back?

Nay, rather let it rouse in us the deepest and the most unconquerable determination. Perseverance is the greatest of virtues in the work. The grace of continuity is the winning force in the end. "To him that overcometh"—how many times does this phrase occur in the Revelation? Many, many times—and always with some new promise, some higher reward held forth for the stimulus and encouragement of the fighter, the worker, the sower. "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

And, finally, let the same thought urge us to earnest, continued, unwearying prayer. "And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith. And shall not God avenge his elect, that cry to Him day and night, and he is longsuffering over them? I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily." Whatever we may fail in, and whatever we may fall back in, do not let us fail to fall on the altar-stairs of prayer that "slope through darkness up to God." "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."



# THE HARVEST OF LIGHT

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. JOSEPH HALSEY

“Light is sown for the righteous.”—PSALM xcvi. 11.

## XII

### THE HARVEST OF LIGHT

OUR thoughts to-day are of sowing and of fruition. When the skies were dark and the clods were wet and the air was chill, the sower went forth, and then out of the cold bosom of earth there sprang "first the blade, then the ear, and after that the full corn in the ear," until the golden sheaves were ripe for the ingathering, and the jocund song of the reapers filled the autumn air. And the warm sap rose into the branches of the trees of the orchard, and the sunbeams kissed the mellowing fruit with such result of beauty and of bounty as now we see around us. And though in many of the farmyards of our land there be sad faces and heavy hearts for crops that stand rotting in the flooded hollows, reaped but not yet garnered, while we sympathise and suffer with them, taking the amplitude of the world's harvests into account, which are also ours, we feel there is still abundant occasion for joy and thankfulness, in which we too would take our part.

To the devout soul everything in Nature is an emblem of higher spiritual realities, and the psalmist takes this harvesting of the fruits of the earth as the type of another sowing and reaping. "Light,"

he says, "is sown for the righteous." The figure is a bold one, and has been challenged by critical-minded persons as incongruous. But it is of no use for the prosaic to attempt to read poetry, and it is like breaking a butterfly upon the wheel to attempt to make a metaphor go upon all fours. The meaning is clear enough, and the image is not only appropriate but beautiful.

Without waiting to inquire into the original application of the words, about which nothing is really known, except that they refer to some bright morning of national deliverance after a long dark night of peril and anxiety, I will briefly indicate some of the senses in which "light" may be said to be "sown."

*And, first, it is no merely fanciful use of the words to suggest that, in a literal sense, light has been sown for our harvesting in those vast buried forests which constitute our coalfields, and are the source of nearly all our artificial light and heat.*

The sunbeams that streamed through long millenniums upon our planet were absorbed by those giant ferns and conifers that flourished in what geologists call the Carboniferous period, and were afterwards submerged and overlaid with other deposits; and after having been imprisoned in the depths and the darkness for long ages, like seed in the soil, the light of those beams is now breaking forth once more for the illumination and service of man. George Stephenson, the great engineer, was once standing with Dr. Buckland, the famous geologist, and others upon the terrace of Sir Robert Peel's mansion, when a railway train flashed along in the

distance, throwing behind it a long trail of white steam. "Now, Buckland," said Stephenson, "can you tell me what is the power that is driving that train?" "Well," said the doctor, "I suppose it is one of your big engines." "But what drives the engine?" "Oh, very likely a canny Newcastle driver." "What do you say to the light of the sun?" "How can that be?" asked the doctor. "It is nothing else," replied the engineer; "it is *light* bottled up in the earth for tens of thousands of years" (light absorbed by plants and vegetables being necessary for the condensation of carbon during the process of their growth), "and now, after being buried in the earth for long ages in fields of coal, the latent light is again brought forth and liberated; made to work, as in that locomotive, for great motive purposes."

That answer was itself a flash of illumination to the mind of the man of science, and there is more meaning in it than even Dr. Buckland or Stephenson himself ever dreamed. For, since that day, not only has light produced by the combustion of coal gas become the chief means of artificial illumination to all civilised nations, but mineral oils derived from the same source are also largely used, and it is the pent-up force of the sunbeam locked up in the coal which drives your motor-cars, and, transformed into heat, generates the power which we transmute again into light in the form of the electric beam. Hundreds of thousands of years ago the light was sown, and now the harvest is being reaped.

That is, taking "light" in the literal sense.

*But light, of course, naturally stands as the symbol*

*of illuminating ideas, and light may be said to be "sown" in the sense that such ideas are prepared, and prepared for, in the providential government of the world.*

Certain great light-bringers appear at different epochs of the world's history, flashing new and glorious revelations on the astonished mind of man, enlarging the horizon of human thought, and disclosing unsuspected glories and sublimities in the realm of Nature and in the universe of ideas. Now and again a Plato, an Aristotle, an Augustine, an Anselm, a Luther, a Calvin, a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Newton, a Goethe, a Faraday, a Darwin comes forth as a new intellectual luminary, lifts the curtain of our ignorance, and dispels the mists of our crude thinking. But these are reapers as much as they are sowers. The light they bring was sown centuries before. They are the children of the light, not its parents. They are the heirs of the ages. They have but evolved the germs that lay hidden in the minds of preceding generations. They have merely gathered up and focussed into themselves the light that was already there, but only latent and not yet brought to the birth. And so even He who was the Light of the World was called the child of the ages, and declared to be born "in the fulness of the times." The light that had been sown by patriarch and prophet found in Him its harvest. He was the fulfilment of the Law. His was not so much a new revelation as a completion and consummation of the old. Glimmerings of many of His teachings are to be found in those who went before Him—philosophers, rabbis, and pietists. In Him the scattered

rays converged, or, to revert to the figure of the text, in Him the hidden, buried truth-germs were brought to fruition and ripened into a harvest that all might reap.

*Now, in order to the harvest, there must be the sowers.*

Who are the sowers of light? Too often it is too true, as the sacred poet sings, that "he who ploughed and who sowed is not missed by the reaper," he is "only remembered by what he has done." Still, it is but right that we who fill our bosoms with the ripened sheaves should ask who they were into whose labours we enter, and without whose toil and pain the fields could not have been "white unto the harvest" for us. Let us, in these days of fuller knowledge and broader precedent, honour the brave searchers after truth, the reformers, martyrs, heretics of their day, who scattered those seeds of light that are yielding such precious store of intellectual and spiritual illumination in our own times. Our freedom of speech, our mental emancipation, our fearless outlook upon the whole domain of knowledge would have been impossible but for the ideas they planted, and which have been slowly germinating through the ages.

Truths are like some seeds which lie dormant in the soil, as it would seem for centuries, without losing their vitality. Stories of "mummy wheat" are apocryphal, but it is a curious and well-attested fact that whenever a primeval forest is cut down and its root-stocks burned, a crop of wild oats immediately and spontaneously springs up. And wherever the spade of the railway excavator brings

to the surface clods that have lain for ages buried far beneath, they are no sooner exposed to the air and the sunbeams than there springs up, almost as by enchantment, a crop of young plants, certainly not originating from seeds freshly sown, but, as it would seem, from seeds that have been lying dormant in the soil for hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of years. I take this upon scientific testimony, as I find it, and herein do we behold a parable. There is like unconquerable vitality in the ideas of the human mind, in the seeds of light and truth cast into the soil of history, it may be centuries ago, but covered up and crusted over with the accretions of superstition and tradition, or the débris of decaying systems and "creeds outworn," until some time of fresh upheaval, when the balmy airs of heaven can breathe upon them once more, and the sunbeams can warm them into life.

*Yes, "light is sown for the righteous." For all lovers of truth the harvest of truth is being ever prepared.*

But some do not know the light when they see it, or it is to them a sign of terror rather than of emancipation. For them the auroral glow upon the horizon is a symbol of doom and not of progress. Those crimson streaks and flaming clouds betoken a day of judgment and the end of all things, rather than the ushering in of a fuller knowledge and a fairer day. Look, for instance, at the attitude that has been adopted towards modern criticism in its bearing upon the origin and authority of the Scriptures. The critics have been denounced as infidels and iconoclasts; they have been compared to the



men who laid sacrilegious hands upon the Ark of the Covenant, and who destroyed the sanctuary "with axes and hammers"; whereas it is they who are sowing the seeds of light to-day that shall bear fruit to coming generations in a saner and more scientific theology, in a truer and a happier creed, in healthier, juster thoughts of God and His ways. And let not you and me shrink from the seemingly thankless task of sowing the seeds whose harvest of light it shall be for the men of the future to reap. The "righteous" men of those after times shall bless our work, even though they will not know our names. And, in the words of one himself amongst the noblest of light-sowers, we may sing our own exultant psalm of the glory to follow and the victories to be :

Hail to the coming singers !  
Hail to the brave light-bringers !  
Forward I reach and share  
All that they sing and dare.

Others shall sing the song—  
Others shall right the wrong—  
Finish what I begin,  
And all I fail of, win.

What matter, I or they ?  
Mine, or another's day,  
So the right word be said  
And life the sweeter made ?

I feel the earth move sunward,  
I join the great march onward,  
And take, by faith, while living,  
My freehold of thanksgiving.

But there is another point of view from which we may regard the psalmist's words.

*He is thinking of the harvest of joy which the seeds of light sown through the long dreary night of disaster and despair shall bring forth to the nation.*

Out of its very calamities blessing and victory should spring. The sun of prosperity should only shine more brightly for its temporary eclipse. This is equally true in the individual experience. When character has been chastened, and the soul's vision clarified through sorrow, all things take on an aspect of consolation, and are gilded with the rays of an immortal hope.

The woods seem greener than they were,  
The skies are brighter blue ;  
The stars shine clearer, and the air  
Lets finer sunlight through ;

for we are living in a reconciled world.

And in this connection the metaphor of the text seems to enshrine, amongst other helpful and comforting suggestions, that of the Divine preparations for and in human lives. "Light is *sown*"; that implies intent. The dawning of the day is not an accident: it is in the preordained order of things. The harvest is not a haphazard occurrence: it was purposed in the husbandman's sowing. And so the light that "sometimes surprises" the upright has nothing of the casual in it. Life teems with gracious preparations, and while the pitiless storm is beating upon our heads, and midnight wraps the soul in gloom, angels are busy scattering the seeds of light along the sodden furrows.

*But the prepared light needs the prepared vision.*

"Light is sown for the righteous," because only the righteous can perceive and rejoice in the light.

There are certain rays in the spectrum that are invisible to us, simply because our optic nerve is not sufficiently sensitive to respond to the rapidity of their vibrations. There are new colours awaiting those who can bring new eyes to them. So much of the joy in our life depends on our capacity to see the Divine purpose and meaning in the things that befall us. The comfort is there, but we cannot take it. We are like Hagar in the wilderness, wretched with thirst, while the fountain is there flashing back the sunlight before our blinded eyes. It is the "children of light" who "walk in the light," and who rejoice in the light. A story is told of a French princess of the house of Orleans visiting her uncle the Duke of Lucca one summer, when the land was filled with flowers and every tree bright with foliage and wreathed with the tendrils of the vine. She had never before been in Italy, so the chronicler tells us, and the wonderful beauty of that enchanted land seemed to her like a dream of paradise. She fancied that the lovely landscape around her had been thus decorated for her sake, and thanked her uncle with tears for his wonderful welcome. But a poet standing beside the princess told her that the giver of the festival was in truth the King of kings; that He was the maker of all this beauty, and that His loving hand had made the land one bower of bloom, not more for her than for the poorest peasant girl within its borders. And yet, was not the feeling which the princess had in the deepest sense a true one after all? It was indeed for her that the beautiful festival of Nature was prepared, because hers was the soul to receive and respond to it. God adorns His earth

for every one who is capable of seeing and enjoying its beauty. "Its glory is born anew in every heart that is conscious of it." If light is sown upon our darkened pathway, springing up into morning gladness, this psalmist would have us believe that it is with Divine intent, and take the comfort of it.

*But this figure of light sown implies, further, something hidden and long waited for, yet certain at last. Even as the seed is buried in the soil, and "the husbandman hath long patience until he receive the early and the latter rain," and, finally, the assured fruition of his labour.*

He does not doubt the harvest because he has had to wait weary months for it. He knew that "in due season" he should "reap if he fainted not." And so the psalmist would have us believe that the certainty of the coming light is as great as that of the present darkness, and that if our calamities are inevitable, our consolations are assured. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

But I hasten to remark on yet one other application of the poetical image of my text.

*I have spoken of providential sowings, but there are also our own personal sowings of light within the garden-plot of the soul.*

There is a sense in which every man is his own sower. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." And I want to say this, that if a man is to reap light, he must sow light. Every one of us makes his own future. Speaking intellectually, if we would have the capacity for light hereafter, we must cultivate it now. There is a tendency in light

to beget light, just as there is a tendency in the seed to bring forth thirty to a hundred fold. Believe and walk in the light you have, and it shall grow from more to more unto noonday splendour. If in the darkness a man, loving the light, sow the seeds of light, further illumination shall come to him hereafter. The history of the evolution of some of the inferior organisms illustrates this. Many creatures of the lower ocean depths are possessed of sightless organs, for no sun's rays penetrate to the dark waters in which they live. But see how the law of compensation works. Their bodies are lined with little eye-like clusters of nerves that are sensitive to phosphorescent rays of light, the only light that can occur at such a depth. But from what source shall they obtain a steady supply of even phosphorescence? And here is a wonderful provision of Nature. Along their heads and backs, imbedded under their own skin, are small round bodies which are self-luminous. Obedient to the dim light it has, the creature thus becomes in time a light unto itself. "Generating its own light, as well as its own visual organs, it seeks food and illumines a pathway through the eternal darkness." The intellectual and spiritual analogy here needs no pointing out. In the deepest darkness sow the light and you shall have your harvest of illumination. Not only shall the light arise for you, but you yourselves shall become light. Then, morally, we may say that a virtuous youth sows light for old age. If there is to be light at evening time, the seeds must be sown in the morning of life. I think you will rarely, if ever, find a sunny old age in those who regarded

their youth as the season for "sowing wild oats." If light is sown, light will come up ; but if the wind is sown, the whirlwind will spring up ; if dragon's teeth are sown, an armed host of poisoned memories will start up and rush into the field.

What, then, are the seeds of light to be sown in the seed-plot of youth, where the dew of life's morning may fall upon them, that they may bring forth happy harvestings hereafter ? Amongst others, kind words and deeds. To scatter these is to flood our whole life's pathway with light. "Curses come home to roost," says the proverb. No less do gentle speech and kindly acts come back to nestle softly in our hearts. Faber, the Catholic poet, prettily sings how he caught up a little child and kissed it and gave it new joy in the sense of having made a new friend. And then he adds :

I am a happier and a richer man,  
Since I have sown this new joy in the earth ;  
'Tis no small thing for us to reap stray mirth,  
In every sunny wayside where we can.

It is a joy to me to be a joy,  
Which may in the most lonely heart take root ;  
And it is gladness to that little boy  
To look out for me at the mountain's foot.

And we may all of us have that little boy looking out for us at the mountain's foot, if we will.

Again, by pure principles and true ideas the youth sows life with the promise of a rich and golden harvest in his later years. What is called the "gay life" has a gruesome and a ghastly ending, and entails a premature old age and an early grave. At the age of thirty-six one of the most

brilliant intellects that England ever produced, Lord Byron, wrote :

My days are in the yellow leaf ;  
The flowers and fruits of love are gone ;  
The worm, the canker, and the grief  
Are mine alone !

Of the seeds of darkness he had sown, he reaped only disillusion and despair. For a youth without purity and without principle no light is sown. The pathway down into the valley is no flowery descent, on which fall the golden glories of the setting sun ; but rather a lava track covered with the rough scoriæ of spent eruptions, and strewn with the ashes of passion's bale-fires, that ceased not till they had burned themselves out, and whose reek still darkens the firmament ; while "the path of the just is as the shining light, which shineth more and more unto the perfect day."





THE DUTY AND JOY OF  
GRATITUDE

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. BERNARD J. SNELL, M.A., B.Sc

**“The Lord hath visited his people in giving them bread.”**  
**RUTH i. 6.**

## XIII

### THE DUTY AND JOY OF GRATITUDE

THE harvest has not failed. It never does fail. One failure would depopulate the world.

If within our shores the harvest is poor, elsewhere it is abundant; and the winds of God blow ships across the seas. Our British policy of free trade has made the world our granary.

The harvest is God's answer to the world's cry for food. "He hath visited his people in giving them bread." Myriads of agencies unite to produce that gift of God. A year ago the materials that make to-day's bread lay dormant in the ground and were blown about in the air. God's rain and sunshine, winter frosts and the winds of spring and summer warmth have wrought again this annual miracle.

We cannot *make* food. Let man work as hard as flesh can hold, let agricultural science be perfected, yet with all the apparatus and all the skill we could not extract a harvest from unwilling earth. "The earth brings forth fruit *of herself*." We depend as wholly on what the earth brings forth as did the distant fathers of our race. Not all the arts and sciences of the world can make food. And it is

good for us to be occasionally brought down from our pulpit rhapsodies and arguments to face these bread-and-butter facts of life. Think of the mystery of growth: we can accelerate it, we can retard it, but we cannot produce it. Think what a factory is a lump of soil, how from that dull mould the various plants suck up their varied nourishment. Think with what unintelligible power the flowers weave from the sunbeam their own colours. Think of a seed's power to store the food for the plant that is to be. Think how it is all past our finding out.

There are those still who object to the decoration of our churches with the fruits of harvest, who remind us that a harvest festival is a pagan remainder. Be it so. The religion of Christ has not come to destroy the religion of Nature, but to purify and fulfil it. The impressiveness and sanctity of a harvest thanksgiving in a Christian church is all the greater in recognition of the fact that dimly distant ancestors deemed it fit to render thanks to the Giver of all, in whatever way they did it. When our Lord instituted the Eucharist, He gave God thanks, and in that service we still make grateful mention of earth's products and partake thereof; and so in the most sacred act of Christian worship earthly necessities are mingled with holiest memories and with highest hopes.

It is true that sometimes a harvest festival seems anomalous amid our city chimneys. It was not our lot to stand in the golden stubble and see the last waggons laden "with four months' sunshine bound in sheaves." And I am afraid that some of our town children may imagine that bread is as much a

manufactured article as books or engines. But a moment's thought suffices to show that the harvest is directly related to the comfort and prosperity of all. Agriculture is the oldest of human industries and the most fundamental. Civilisation began with agriculture, and the social order rests ultimately upon it. It is fit that one day in the year should religiously celebrate that fact. Indeed, it is strange that while the Christian Year has many special days commemorating the events of Jesus' life on earth, while it contains a festival of the Holy Spirit and of the Trinity, it has no festival of God the Father, the Giver of all good. This day does, in some degree, supply the omission, for it is the festival of the Divine Beneficence.

Day by day we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Having received the bread, let the heart sing its thanksgiving. Gratitude springs spontaneous in a noble heart; by the common consent of mankind ingratitude is blameworthy and contemptible.

Yet how few are our expressions of gratitude to the All-Father! The very constancy of our gifts leads to our forgetfulness. It is only by an effort of the will that we pause to realise that every hour has its blessing, and that the pledges of the Divine care are everywhere. Let there be but the appearance of a moment's intermission in that universal providence, and how much more highly we appraise that which until that moment we had received with unthoughtful negligence! Surely the perpetuity of the Divine kindness does not make that kindness less kind. But assuredly its perpetuity does tend to make us careless and forgetful.

And, again, our lack of gratitude may be partially due to the fact that we permit the smallest drawback to embitter our spirits to thanklessness. A mote in the eye, and all sunshine is vexatious. Let one nerve ache, and the universe becomes a wilderness of misery. Let one hope be unrealised, one need unfulfilled, and forthwith to us Providence becomes a myth. It should not be so, but so it is.

And, I fear further, many of us forget that there is One to whom we should be grateful. Our knowledge of Nature's laws seems to have removed God further away. We talk so incessantly of secondary causes that we fail to penetrate beyond these secondary causes. Trace back far enough, and ask yourself if God is not the giver. We speak of the forces of Nature as though they were self-created and self-regulating; we speak of the laws of Nature as if such laws came into being without a legislator and were administered without a sovereign. Brethren, it is good to remind ourselves that we have not solved a mystery when we have given it a name. Our knowledge goes a very short way; our explanations explain very little. It is still true that "*He* maketh the grass to grow on the mountains," "*He* watereth the hills from his chambers, and the earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works," "Fire and hail, snow and vapour, stormy wind fulfil his word," "He crowneth the year with his goodness."

It is surely good that we should begin to pay "the debt immense of endless gratitude" owed by us to the Parent of all good. Who of us can say conscientiously that our gratitude to God has been

in any degree proportionate to the benefits received at His hands? I suggest the question, but I am too conscious of my own shortcomings to suggest it censoriously.

Think of the delights that have come to us through the avenues of sight and hearing; recall the joys of lovely scenery, of pictures, of sunshine, of music. Think of the gladness of life, of health and strength and work. When sickness comes, and we can do nothing else but think, we begin to feel some penitence in these matters and to make some promises. But sick-bed promises are writ in water.

With every year that is added to my life I feel more keenly the inadequacy of my appreciation of God's wondrous world. Every year the spring is more precious, the summer more delightful, the autumn more glorious. And many a time I marvel that so many years have passed me by and I have learnt so little, wondered so little, enjoyed so little all these everyday marvels of creation.

One day at a lunatic asylum an inmate asked me quite suddenly, *à propos* of nothing, "Did you ever thank God that you are not mad?" Never!

Have you ever tried to realise how great a boon is yours, that you were born of Christian parents and brought up in a household of faith?

It is only when we begin to enumerate our reasons for gratitude that we find how endless is the list. For it is to the Heavenly Father that we owe the blessings of civilisation, the dear delights of home, friendship, and love, the knowledge of godly and gifted men and women, all the influences for good that fall upon our lives, all the opportunities

of blessing others, all the helps that are ours as Christ's disciples, all the sacred ties that bind us to the unseen world, and the faith which fills the sad hours of life with the light of immortal hope.

Even as I rehearse this scanty list in your hearing, my own heart condemns me. I have been almost thankless.

Is there any one of us who can say, "I have been sufficiently grateful: I owe no more thanks"?

God forbid that, in the last day, His bounties and gifts should testify against us as against unthankful children!



# SOWING AND REAPING

## Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. J. G. GREENHOUGH, M.A.

“Be not deceived ; God is not mocked : for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption ; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”—GAL. vi. 7, 8.

## XIV

### SOWING AND REAPING

I HAVE no great love for harvest thanksgiving services as they have come to be ordinarily conducted, though I have nothing but the kindest feelings towards those who find in them a means of grace. Let every one be fully persuaded in his own mind. Who art thou that judgest another? There are good souls that like to see the sanctuary turned into an agricultural show on this special occasion, and preachers who can preach and pray fervently and eloquently before the gorgeous array of prodigious turnips and cauliflowers. I envy them their self-possession and adaptability. I would rather see that display of edibles in the market. And really turnips are not half so inspiring to a preacher as the sight of earnest faces. And yet no one is more ready than I am to think the thought which the harvest suggests, and to uplift the voice in praise to the Lord of harvest when the bounteous fruit and grain are safely garnered. We are so ready to forget the source of all our wealth and joy, so ready to complain, murmur, and fret if wind, weather, and season are not altogether to our taste, that it is really a good thing to strike up another tune occasionally and

remind each other that we are not so desperately ill-used by God after all. And there are certain lessons both of seed-time and harvest which should never be forgotten by the preacher—in fact, they never can be quite forgotten by him, because they enter so largely into Bible teaching, and always form part of his message to men. They are old lessons, of course. Moses taught them, and Noah, and probably Adam, when he had fooled away his paradise. And our Blessed Lord said some of His choicest words about them, and St. Paul emphasised them in the text which I have read to you. Everything has been said about them that can be said, and yet it is helpful to stir up the mind by way of remembrance. That is sometimes all which the cleverest man can do, and it may be the best thing he can do.

## I

*Now, we always divide and classify human lives by these three terms—spring, summer, and autumn ; or, if you prefer it, seed-time, waiting time, and harvest.*

Those three times are represented in every congregation. Some of you have done very little reaping yet; your young hands and minds are busily sowing, and you can only guess what the harvest will be. Others of you, a little more advanced in years, have done a great deal of labour and thought, and maybe of sin, which have not yet brought forth their fruits—the time has not come. You will only understand the outcome of it all when the ripening and mellowing years are upon you. And a few of us have

begun to reap. The autumn time is upon us. We are gathering what we sowed in earlier years. The books we read, the thoughts we entertained, the tastes we cultivated, the associations that we loved, the habits which we formed, the ambitions we pursued, the friendships we made, the prayers we offered, the religious work we took up, ay, and also the sins and follies that we indulged in, are yielding their fruit to-day in refined character, in developed power, in moral influence, in spiritual understanding, in large thoughts and precious memories, and noble faiths and lasting affections; or perhaps in just the things which are the opposite of all these. And it is not until you reach that time of life when the sowing is mainly over and the daily reaping has begun that you fully understand and believe these words of St. Paul. You believe them then because every day brings you a new proof of them. "God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"

## II

*A great many people, especially in youth, but more or less all through life, believe that God can be mocked.*

They think that God forgets, or does not know or does not care what kind of seed they sow, and that a fairly satisfactory harvest will appear further on irrespective of the sowing. No one ever makes that mistake about Nature, which is really only another name for God—only a portion of His ways and thoughts. Every one knows that as you deal with Nature so she will deal with you. The seed

which you drop into the soil never changes its character in the course of its growth. It is increased and multiplied, but it always comes out of its *own* kind. You never gather sheaves of wheat from the white light gossamer seed which the thistle scatters, barley never comes up as oats, or thorn-bushes as fig-trees, and no quantity of faith, labour, and imagination can make nettles yield roses or change nightshade and hemlock into sweet honeysuckle and luscious vines. Nature is never tricked in this way. Whatsoever you sow, that you reap.

But men think that in the broader field of life they can sow one thing and reap another. They can sow folly, and reap wisdom ; they can sow wild oats, and gather honest wheat ; they can sow excess, and reap soberness and moderation ; they can sow unclean and diseased things, and reap health, strength, and a well-balanced mind hereafter ; they can sow neglect, and reap the rewards of duty ; they can sow unbelief, irreligion, and contempt of God, and reap the peace of mind and joy in living which only come to faith. They think they can shape the harvest to their own liking when the time comes, whatever the sowing may have been. They think they can sow to the devil and reap not the devil's pay, but good solid wages as true and rich as God gives His servants at the end of each day's toil and in the final reckoning. And it is not to be done. "God is not mocked ; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

The sort of life you live in your youth inevitably determines the kind and quality of man and woman that you will be further on, unless there is some

complete and fundamental change wrought by God just as you pass into the fuller years, and even then the ill sowing which you have done will have its harvest. A youth who lives mainly for sport will develop into a muscular animal, with plenty of sinew and without much brain. You can't grow thoughtfulness by athletics ; you can only grow thought by thinking. A youth who hardly ever opens a book or reads about what men are thinking and doing in the large fields of life, will grow up mentally crippled, dwarfed in all his sympathies and ambitions, and utterly unfit to take a man's real place in the world. He sows as a fool, and he inevitably reaps the harvest of a fool. Nay, if you read nothing but light stuff—the mere froth of literature, the titbits of newspapers, the inflated gush and cheap frippery of sensational love stories—you are sowing the seed of scatter-brained dissipation, and you reap the fruits of mental flabbiness more or less all through life. Poor weak stuff always comes up as poor weak stuff. It does not get transformed in the growing. The mind yields what is put into it, and the soul grows into the things it feeds on. The sins of youth habitually indulged in, yield the harvest of an unclean mind, an impure imagination, sometimes an enfeebled brain and debilitated body. The pipe which is rarely out of your mouth, the glass of strong drink which is too often at your lips, mean sooner or later weakened intellectual force, weakened bodily force, and a partial disablement in life's battle. They often mean a soured temper and an irritable, croaking, despondent disposition. There is no escape from these consequences. The harvest is delayed,

but it ripens in the set time ; and your unbelief, your sneer at sacred things, your contempt of God and religion all bring forth their appropriate fruits in after life.

If you begin by having no faith in God, you end by losing faith in nearly everything. The sceptic grows into the cynic. A man who does not believe in the goodness of the Heavenly Father will presently cease to believe in the worthiness of his earthly father, in the truthfulness of his children, in the sincerity of his friends. Fling away God's love and we fling away human love : the power of loving dies in you. This holds everywhere, there are no exceptions : " Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." You sow selfishness, you produce selfishness in others : men deal with you as you have dealt with them. You sow the seed of an evil tongue—a bitter, whispering, malicious, slanderous tongue. There is a big harvest for you growing just of its own kind : the evil which you utter returns to you. You will find by and bye that you have won distrust, suspicion, contempt. The respect of men will fail you ; the love of men will turn away. And good things always yield a harvest of good. Pure thoughts give you visions of God ; love begets love ; reverence in you wins the respect and reverence of others ; prayers have their harvest in religious steadfastness, in happy trust, in the courage which faces difficulties, in the cheerfulness which bears sorrow. Duty honestly done brings the quiet conscience, the victory over fear, the brave, bright hopefulness.

It is the neglect of duty that makes the coward.



He who tries to do the will of God will always be strong, because he will always know that he has God on his side. And the service of others, the unselfish service of others brings always a great ingathering. It brings memories more precious than gold; it brings the Master's daily "well done"; it brings slowly, but in ever accumulating measure, human gratitude, human affection, lasting friendships, and abiding honour. There are men and women about you who are enjoying a rich harvest now of quiet power, of noble influence and God-like satisfaction. Their later years and their evening-time are beautiful and magnificently fruitful. They have been sowing godly and Christ-like things from youth upward. Every one says as he looks on them, "Let my mature years be like theirs." Few sights are fairer than that which is seen autumn after autumn around many an English homestead, when, as evening falls, the waggons stand laden among the golden stubble, and the gleaners are scattered over the misty field; when men and women cluster round the gathered sheaves, and rejoice in the loving-kindness of the earth; when in the dewy air the shouts of happy people are heard, and the song goes up after months of patient labour—the song of thanksgiving and gladness for the harvest won.

But there is a fairer picture than that, yet of the same kind. When a good man comes to his autumn, and when people say of him—what he is always too humble to say of himself—that all through his years he has been sowing God's seed in God's field; sowing under Christ as the Master workman; sowing faith, and prayer, and kindly service, and

sweet, honest love of his fellow-men; sowing purity, and high thoughts, and guiding influences, and noble example; and is now gathering all the rich harvest of peace and trust, and sunny hope in God, and sheaves of human love. Which of us does not secretly or openly pray for a harvest time like that! I speak not now of what lies beyond. The greater part of this harvest, be it bad or good, is never reaped on earth. We have almost given up preaching future retribution and future reward. What our fathers were not afraid to name—hell and heaven—have well-nigh passed out of pulpit language, and a great many people think there are no such things because they are rarely mentioned. But God is not mocked: His realities stand though we are conveniently blind. There is a hell about which we know nothing, save that it is too terrible for words to describe. And there is a heaven of perfect peace and glad reward, which far exceeds all that our imagination can picture. We may deny it, ridicule it, and forget it, we cannot get rid of it, unless we can put God out of His government and prove that all Christ's words were lies. He that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; and he that soweth to the Spirit life eternal.

# GRATITUDE FOR DIVINE MERCIES

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. Principal D. ROWLANDS, B.A.

“What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord.”—PSALM cxvi. 12, 13.

## XV

### GRATITUDE FOR DIVINE MERCIES

IT is sometimes stated that all religion is founded upon a belief in the existence of God ; for where no God is recognised no worship can be rendered. This statement, however, is defective ; it embraces only half the truth ; for another important element lies at the foundation of all true worship, namely, a sense of absolute dependence upon God. "For in him," saith Paul, "we live, and move, and have our being." "Every good gift and every perfect gift," saith James, "is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." For our very being, for every breath that we breathe, for every comfort that we enjoy, we are dependent upon Him, and upon Him alone. And to the extent that this fact is realised by us shall we pay Him the homage of our hearts. All irreligion proceeds from a state of mind which is the very opposite of this. "The fool," saith the psalmist, "hath said in his heart, There is no God," and accordingly he feels no dependence upon Divine power. The humility of the devout worshipper never enters his soul ; and thus he spends his days a stranger to the highest happiness.

Circumstances occur in life in which our dependence upon God becomes more conspicuous than usual, and is consequently more keenly felt. When we have obtained remarkable deliverances from imminent dangers or sudden death, when we have received extraordinary tokens of Divine mercy and benevolence, when our cups run over with gladness and our hearts leap for joy, then indeed, if we are not utterly incapable of thought and reflection, we must feel how much we owe to God's incessant kindness. The sight of fields covered with golden corn, ripe for the sickle, which year after year delights our eyes, and especially the sight of an abundant harvest gathered in, in a sound and wholesome condition, leads us to wonder not only at the constancy of those laws of Nature whose combined action produces such a glorious result, but also at the beneficence of the great Law-giver who has arranged and established them for that purpose. It appears that the psalmist, when he wrote this psalm, had been delivered by God out of some mighty trouble. How great that trouble was may be gathered from the telling language with which he describes it. "The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow." But while in this terrible situation he directed his thoughts heavenward, and looked for help where he had often found help before. Nor did he look in vain, for he saith, "Thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling." And in the text he communes with his own soul, and considers how he may most effectually prove his gratitude for this timely deliverance. "What shall

I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me?"

Now, this simple question of the psalmist is one which we may with the greatest propriety ask ourselves. Let us examine our own history, and consider the intricate paths along which God has led us, the numberless sorrows from which God has delivered us, the uniform liberality with which God has treated us—let us do this sincerely, thoughtfully, earnestly, and the warmest thanks we have ever offered to Him will appear cold, feeble, and inadequate.

I shall now endeavour to direct your attention to two topics suggested by the text, namely, the benefits bestowed by God on man, and the gratitude due from man to God. I maintain that a proper apprehension of these subjects is essential to all right thinking and all right living.

## I

### *The benefits bestowed by God.*

1. *That human existence is in every case the free gift of God.*

It may appear a very simple question for a man to ask himself—Why was I born? why was I made a living soul? why was I summoned to the stage of being? Still, this is a question which very few think of asking, and to which fewer still have found a satisfactory reply. And however much you may ponder it in your mind, however diligently you may investigate its various bearings, however frequently you may reason about it to others, the sum of your knowledge will after all never amount to more than

this, that so it seemed good in the sight of God. Our existence, then, is God's free gift, it is an effusion of His unbounded munificence.

But there is another question which every man may very properly ask himself. Why was I made a man, and not an inferior, irrational, perishing creature? The world in which we dwell teems with life ; millions of animals varying in size and importance swarm on every hand ; even a drop of water, when placed under the microscope, is found to contain a number of diminutive creatures, which move and sport within it with apparently as much freedom and delight as the whales which inhabit the northern seas. An innumerable host of insects that are born in the morning, after enjoying themselves in the sunshine for a few brief hours, perish for ever, to be followed day after day by other generations of insects doomed to the same fate. What a dignified creature, then, man must be, when compared with one of these ! How elevated his position, how magnificent his powers, how grand his destiny ! His body is the most beautiful and perfect animal structure with which we are acquainted, his soul is endowed with powers almost divine, and above all he is an heir of immortality. The most insignificant human being might address the rising sun, who, emerging from his nightly retreat, illumines the eastern sky with a flood of glory—might address him, saying, "I am of greater value and importance than thou art ; for when thy light shall have been extinguished in eternal darkness, I shall not only exist, but grow in power, knowledge, and experience." The place, therefore, which man occupies among other creatures



is honourable in the highest degree. But who has made man to differ from the worm? and why has this difference been made? All this must be regarded as an expression of God's sovereign will. Man's exalted position in the scale of being is the free and unmerited gift of God.

And then just consider the peculiar mode of existence which we enjoy, the relation of the human constitution to its outward surroundings, and see how the perfect harmony which exists between our faculties and the material universe is adapted to promote happiness. It is true that there is a vast deal of misery in the world; it is true that "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now"; but it is equally true that the miseries of life are not the necessary results of Divine laws and arrangements, but rather of the violation of those laws and arrangements. It was evidently God's purpose to make life enjoyable, to make existence a sweet and precious inheritance. We can easily conceive of a different state of things; we can easily imagine how life might have been made a burden, how existence might have been made intolerable. The rays of the sun falling upon the pupil of the eye might have produced a sense of weariness and pain; but instead of that the words of the Preacher are emphatically and universally true, "Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." The soft, genial sunshine, while it serves to discover to our vision the various objects among which we move, and the beautiful scenes with which we are surrounded, is pleasurable and soothing to the organ

of vision itself. The vibrations of sound, coming in contact with the drum of the ear, might have been accompanied with agony and torment ; but instead of that you may say that nothing is more agreeable to the ear than the sense of sound, nothing gives it a greater degree of satisfaction. Sound reaches us in such a variety of forms and combinations—in the loving voices of friends, in the sweet strains of melody, in the soft rustling of the summer winds, in the majestic roar of the ocean waves—that it is to us an inexhaustible source of information and pleasure. Every morsel that we eat and every drop that we drink might have filled us with disgust ; so that, while eating and drinking were necessary to sustain life, we could have thought of neither without aversion. But, instead of that, eating and drinking are so grateful to the organs of taste, and so conducive to serenity and contentment, that they form important items in the sum of earthly felicity. When men meet together around the festive table, they generally forget all their differences, and bury all their troubles, and hearts cold and austere will overflow with kindness. Thus we might go on multiplying instances which prove that such exquisite harmony exists between our constitutions and the outside world as is eminently adapted to secure our wellbeing. And in all this, if we be not altogether wanting in thought and reflection, we cannot fail to recognise the goodness of the Creator.

2. *That all God's dealings with man are distinguished by love and beneficence.*

He has not only given us an exalted nature, has not only made us capable of happiness and joy, but

has made us the objects of His constant care. He is our Father; and no father provides for his children with such diligence as He provides for us. The very hairs of our heads are numbered by Him; our most trivial movements are watched by Him; asleep and awake, in sickness and in health, we are never out of His sight. Just think of the many accidents to which we are daily exposed, the various dangers we encounter by sea and by land, the uncertain conditions on which life itself depends, and you may form some conception of the extent of the support and protection which He affords us. These things seem to have impressed the prophet Isaiah so much on one occasion, that he wondered at the blindness of those who failed to realise them. "Why sayest thou, O Jacob," saith he, "and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding."

God has given us the earth for an inheritance, and a most magnificent, beautiful, and glorious inheritance it is. I don't think many of us have yet learned to appreciate it. And it is a fact worthy of attention, that He has divided this inheritance among us in almost equal shares. The difference between rich and poor in this respect is not so great as some are apt to suppose. When we look on the one hand on the wealthy landlord, who dwells in his stately mansion, enjoying the luxuries of life to his heart's content, and look on the other hand on the

poor labourer, who dwells in his lowly cot, scarcely knowing any day how to provide for the morrow, we are prone to jump to rash conclusions, and to say that the riches of this world are very unequally distributed. But is it so? Is not this a very superficial view of the matter? The poor man may sit beneath the evening sky, and gaze on those bright orbs above in their silent march across the heavens; and as he contemplates the wondrous scene, his heart may glow with burning thoughts, produced by that inspiration which flows from communion with the infinite and eternal. The poor man may walk into the fields, and breathe air laden with the perfume of a thousand herbs; or he may climb the mountain's side, and inhale the pure, bracing atmosphere abounding there, and behold with rapture and delight the charming and varied scenery with which he is surrounded. The poor man may, after the toils and labours of the day are over, spend a joyous evening in the bosom of his family, and feel what a blessed thing it is to enjoy the sympathy and love of those who are dear to his heart. And I should like to know how much more real happiness the richest man on earth can get out of life than this. But the rich, you may say, have possessions—land, houses, wealth—which the poor have not. True; but we ought to remember that riches bring with them cares as well as enjoyments; and if the poor are deprived of the enjoyments, neither are they troubled with the cares.

But let us pass for a moment from these proofs of God's beneficence to men, and consider what He has done to rescue them from their fallen and lost condition. Notwithstanding all God's goodness

towards us, we are sinners, we break His commandments, we rebel against His authority, we seek our own destruction. Herein, then, is God's benevolence displayed most conspicuously, in that He has provided the means whereby we may be saved, in that "He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all." "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." A higher manifestation of love it would be impossible to conceive of; it is indeed such a manifestation of love as no race of beings that we know of, but men, have been favoured with.

## II

### *The gratitude due from man.*

"What shall I render unto the Lord?"

The psalmist was not one of those thoughtless and indifferent men who pass through life receiving all, enjoying all, expecting all, without ever bestowing a thought on the bountiful Giver. On the contrary, he seems to have been so overwhelmed by the magnitude and multiplicity of God's benefits that he scarcely knew how to express his gratitude. The language he employs is that of a man perplexed, bewildered, overcome; hardly knowing what to say or how to act. "For *all* his benefits toward me"—benefits great, benefits small, benefits temporal,

benefits spiritual; but all benefits unmerited and free. "For *all* his benefits"; as they rose before his view, a vast, countless host, they laid him under a debt of obligation which he could never hope to discharge. Let us for a moment consider his words, and employ them for our own instruction. They imply—

1. *That true gratitude finds its expression in deeds, and not simply in words.*

"What shall I *render* unto the Lord?" Words are cheap, and easily spoken; they cost no effort and involve no sacrifice; hence you will find that men generally prefer to express their gratitude in words to any other way. But give me the gratitude which, though it dispenses with high-sounding words, and even though it employs no words at all, still bursts forth a living reality in grateful and loving deeds. And this is the gratitude which is most acceptable in the sight of God. "What shall I *render*?" These are not the words of a self-righteous Pharisee who imagines that he can, by means of his own performances, merit the benefits of God; but rather of one who is so deeply conscious of his own unworthiness that he almost despairs of being able to render to God acceptable service, and yet is all the while burning with intense desire to do so. In one sense there is nothing whatever that we can do for God; we cannot add to His felicity, nor help Him in His labours; this is beyond our power, however much we may wish it. In another sense, however, there is a great deal which we may be able to do for God. We can render service to Him by serving His cause; we can

render assistance to Him by assisting His children ; we can show kindness to Him by considering His poor. And at the great day of reckoning it is said that "the King shall say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world : for I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat : I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink : I was a stranger, and ye took me in : naked, and ye clothed me : I was sick, and ye visited me : I was in prison, and ye came unto me." And when they will express astonishment at His words, and fail to remember these services laid to their credit, the King will clear up the matter by saying, "Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." It is a question, therefore, which we ought frequently to ask ourselves—What are we doing for God? by what tangible deeds do we express our gratitude to Him for all His benefits? for surely opportunities of doing Him service and of showing Him kindness are constantly thrown in our way.

2. *That true gratitude is accompanied by cheerfulness and joy.*

"I will take the cup of salvation." What the allusion is in these words, it is difficult to say. "I will take the cup of salvation," that is, *the cup of deliverance*. It may refer to the drink-offerings appointed by the law in token of thankfulness to God for deliverance. It seems also to have been customary with the pious Jews to have the cup of deliverance at their private tables, "which the master

of the family drank first of with thanksgiving to God, and all at the table pledged him." To some such custom, no doubt, the psalmist refers here. But however that may be, we cannot mistake the spirit in which the words are spoken. They are an expression of joy arising from a grateful heart ; and thus they point to a lesson which we all need to learn. Some make a virtue of cherishing gloomy thoughts, and walking about God's earth with a downcast countenance, as if sighs and groans were the most acceptable sacrifices that man can offer to God. But no mistake can be greater than this ; no mistake can be more mischievous in its effects. Let us therefore, as much as possible, avoid everything like a morose, grumbling, dissatisfied spirit ; knowing how incompatible it must be with a true sense of gratitude, and how displeasing it must be to God. In the midst of trials and difficulties and suffering, let us endeavour to look at the bright side ; for a bright side there is even to the darkest cloud that frowns upon us. Thus only can we cultivate true gratitude—gratitude that will heighten the joy of prosperity and diminish the grief of adversity.

3. *True gratitude leads to closer communion with God.*

"And call upon the name of the Lord." How natural it is for us, when we have received great kindness at the hands of a friend, to cling to that friend with greater affection than ever. With what intense love, therefore, ought we to direct our thoughts to God ! How we ought to serve, to worship, and to adore Him ! The very thought of God's benefits ought to draw our souls to Him as



the centre of our purest, strongest, highest affections. Let us call upon His name ; let us make Him our dearest Friend ; let us go to Him in all our difficulties and in all our sorrows. One way of showing our gratitude to God for benefits received is to ask for more ; and there is no attitude in which He delights to see us more than when we bow before His throne to ask for the various blessings which we constantly require. With men you sometimes use such a plea as this, "Give us this time, and we will never trouble you again" ; but it is a more prevailing plea with God to say, "Give us this time, and we will never cease to ask Thee for whatever we may need."



# THE BLOSSOMING ROD

## A Flower Sermon

By Rev. ALFRED ROWLAND, D.D., B.A., LL.B.

“ And, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded  
 , . and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds.”—NUM. xvii. 8.

## XVI

### THE BLOSSOMING ROD

IN this curious incident we have an example of God's condescension. This is shown in nothing more clearly than in His method of teaching spiritual truth to the carnally-minded. Any one who reflects on the intellectual and moral condition of the Israelites when, as a horde of enfranchised slaves, they came out of Egypt, will see that it must have been far lower than that of children in a Christian home. They were degraded by tyranny and idolatry, and could only learn by modes of teaching which would probably not have been adopted had they been enlightened as we have been by centuries of Christian influence. It was essential that these people, who were to be witnesses for the one living, unseen God, should be convinced that He existed, and that He was the world's Ruler. This could not be demonstrated to them by metaphysical discourses, but by incidents which would effectively appeal to such capacities as they had.

If, for example, they were to learn that food was the gift of God, they must be taught by the fall of manna. If they were to be convinced that men in perplexity could enjoy Divine guidance, they must

see the cloud which led them by day and shone over them when all else was dark. Similarly with the lesson referred to in this verse. They needed to be assured that Aaron, their high priest, had been chosen of God. How could this be done? Not by the fiat of Moses, who might have been considered prejudiced in favour of his brother ; but by placing rods representing his tribe and other tribes before the ark of the covenant, in order to know which of them would burst into blossom and fruit. Thus these people, ignorant as untaught children, were led to say, "God has done this, and the man represented by this wonderful rod is the priest whom He has chosen."

The incident is familiar and suggestive to any Bible student. Aaron had been appointed high priest. Only he and his family were to offer sacrifices, and appear for the people in the Holy Place. But many were envious of him, as men often are when honour is conferred on another. This would have been well if it had been their ambition to surpass him in holiness. But theirs was the sin of the Pharisees, who hated and crucified the Lord Jesus largely because their prestige seemed threatened. They did not covet nearness to God ; for spiritual approach to Him is never limited, and was not even in those days. The exclusiveness of the Aaronic office did not refer to the spiritual privileges of the people, but to the prerogatives of Christ, the Great High Priest, whose office is exclusive of all others. The modern form of their sin appears in those who claim to offer sacrifices and make intercession as their exclusive privilege.

The evidence of Aaron's authority was picturesquely given. Twelve long straight rods were cut from an almond tree, as nearly alike as possible, and the name of the head of each tribe was written on each; Aaron's being one. These were laid before the ark in the tabernacle, no one being allowed to approach them. Next morning Moses entered, and found that only one had blossomed and fruited. This was Aaron's, and it became the symbol of his authority; for all acknowledged that God, the only Giver of life, had touched it.

We will look first at the twelve rods lying together in silence and solitude; and then at the one rod which budded, hoping for a fulfilment of Kingsley's lines, which tell

How Nature, the old nurse, took  
The child upon her knee,  
Saying, "Here is a story-book,  
Thy Father hath written for thee."

The key to the interpretation of this symbolism lies in the fact that the rods represented men.

## I

*Look at this bundle of rods.*

1. *They were cut from a promising tree.*

Rightly so, because they stood for the chosen leaders of a chosen people. The almond tree was most suitable for the purpose, because it is of all trees earliest in promise. Hence the Hebrews called it "the Awaker." In the Vulgate the word *virga* is

used for "a rod." It means a twig, a green branch. In the word *virgo* we find the same idea of blossoming beauty, for it denotes a young girl in the first flush of womanhood. The idea is repeated in *virtus*, courage or manliness; and both find their root in *vir* = a man in his prime. There is something of promise about all these, and about those represented by the "rods," the *virgae*.

And what possibilities there are about us, especially about the young amongst us! What capacities unawakened! What faculties undeveloped! What powers not used for the highest purposes! Think of the influence over business which is represented in any congregation. Think of the impetus which might be thrown into some municipal or political movement, if every one wisely used the rights of citizenship. Think of the channels through which influence for good, or evil, is constantly pouring: in the home among children, through the press in articles which lead a nation's thought, in schools where character is being rapidly moulded. So many opportunities are lost, or have been misused, that like the rods we must lie before the mercy-seat of God. But life's possibilities still lie before many. They still have their future to make. Let such be on their guard lest the blossoms be killed by a frost and the chance of fruit destroyed. Amid the fragrance of summer flowers, which tell of the goodness of God, let us consecrate ourselves to Him, and He who is the Giver of life will transform the rod of promise into the sceptre of a king.

2. *The rods were outwardly alike.*

It has been suggested that Aaron's differed from



the others ; that in point of fact it was the wonder working rod which Moses stretched over the Red Sea. But this would have been obviously unfair. It would not have been accepted by the competitors or by the people. The rods were as nearly alike as could be, cut possibly from the same tree, and distinguishable only by the names upon them.

Now it is one of the most solemn facts in human experience that those who start alike often end life very differently. We have known a man hard and merciless, who in pushing his way to prosperity has trampled on the rights of others, and on his own conscience too. Another, nearly related to him, is known for his sterling integrity and boundless kindness, a living witness for Christ, a true child of God. Yet, though so unlike each other now, those two were born in the same house, of the same parentage, and were educated in the same school. It reminds us that difference in character, which really lasts, is inward and unseen ; and that our Lord truly declared "the kingdom of heaven is within you."

3. *The difference between Aaron's rod and the others was made by the touch of God.*

At first all were alike in the fact that they were cut off from the parent stem. "Cut off." It is emblematic of man's condition since sin came and severed fellowship between man and his Maker. It reminds us of our Lord's words : "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered." In other words, there is no spiritual life apart from Him. A man may have gifts of many kinds and yet be destitute of that. He is cleverness

incarnate. There are few things he cannot do, if he only sets himself to do them. He is envied by multitudes, and yet knows no more of prayer than does his horse or his dog. Better surely be one of the poor ignorant folk he looks down upon, if they have within them the sure and certain hope of a blessed immortality; and resemble Aaron's rod, which, under the touch of God, budded, blossomed, and brought forth fruit.

## II

*Now let us learn what the blossoming rod has to teach us.*

Notice two facts about it.

1. *It was laid before the Ark of the Covenant.*

That was the place where mercy, pardon, cleansing, and fellowship might be enjoyed. And the rod laid before it represents men offering themselves to God, which is the essence of a religious life. All noble lives begin thus. Think of Moses, for example. When he was out in the wilderness he was not at first ready to submit himself and his plans to the Lord. He preferred his own way of delivering the people, as he had done in Egypt. At last he yielded to the Divine will. Conscious of his unfitness, yet believing that God would be with him, he gave himself right up, to be used in God's own way. From that moment he was victorious. He never afterwards showed fear or lack of power, but out of weakness was made strong. Similar was the experience of the disciples at Pentecost. They were filled with the Spirit

directly they were emptied of self; just as air will rush in through the smallest crevice where there is a vacuum. Hence the resolve of each should be:

Here, Lord, I give myself to Thee,  
'Tis all that I can do.

*2. Blossom and fruit resulted from God-given life.*

They were not put on, they were put forth. They were the outward expression of inward vigour. This inward life is what we need to set us right, and make us beautiful and fruitful in the Paradise of God. We sometimes talk of "turning over a new leaf"; but we may do that without partaking of Divine life. The putting off of one bad habit does not prevent the forming of another. But if the inward life is quickened, the putting off of evil and the putting forth of good will come about as naturally as leaves fall and buds come. If a tree is healthy one need not do much to it. It grows of itself, and asserts its life by leaves, blossoms, and fruit.

Therefore we should pray that we may have life "more abundantly." Sometimes a professing Christian is like the statue before which Pygmalion bowed in prayer. It was perfect in form, exquisite in beauty, but his heart was overwhelmed with sorrow because it was dead. The legend tells us that in answer to his prayer the gods gave the statue life—a warm flush of colour stole over the face, the eyes were lit with love, and what had been dead became warm and sensitive. Such a transformation is a spiritual possibility, and in view of

it we may well pray for the breath of God, for the spirit of life, that once more the words may be fulfilled: "The Lord God breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living soul."

We may all hope, then, for such beauty and fruitfulness in the Christian life that in the truest sense this old-world emblem may have its fulfilment. "And, behold, the rod . . . budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds."

THE SPIRIT OF THE HARVEST-  
GIVER

Harvest Festival Sermon

By REV. J. A. CLAPPERTON, M.A.

“**God** is love.”—I JOHN iv. 8.

## XVII

### THE SPIRIT OF THE HARVEST-GIVER

THESE three words are the crown of revelation. They are proved and illustrated in a most striking way in the rich harvest that God annually provides for the human race. For God's harvest-love possesses three characteristic qualities: it is an earnest, a modest, and a liberal love.

#### I

*First let us note the earnestness of the Divine love that brings us our annual harvest.*

Take a single grain of corn. It has cost the Divine Being thousands of years of forethought and labour. We know that it is useless to sow wheat on hard clay or solid rock. Yet there was a day when the whole earth did not possess a single handful of soil. How has God made the soil? Partly by the action of rain, frost, and rivers. Very largely, too, by the great glaciers that went grinding over our earth in the last of the great geological periods. The icebergs and glaciers of those days did probably the greatest part of the work of turn-

ing the hard granites and sandstones and limestones into the fine powdered dust that we call soil.

But those processes took thousands of years, what we call "ages." And if God had not thought and laboured for us during those thousands of years, not even the tiniest grain of corn could have existed to-day.

Herein is a most impressive lesson for us. God's love is more than a sentiment, a kindly feeling. God's love has led Him to be in such earnest about our comfort that He has thought for us and toiled for us for ages. So painstaking is His love that He does not make the smallest ear of corn without thousands of years of preparatory work!

Such is the attention that Divine love gives to *little* things. How different it is with many of us! We are tempted to be quite careless in our lesser duties. But it is not God's way. Everything is important to God. He does everything *thoroughly*. And it will be a happy day for our country when every workman has learned that lesson, and scorns the idea of turning out any imperfect work. It will be a happy day for our homes when every member of the household has an earnest love like that of the Harvest-Giver, and is ashamed to do anything by halves. It will be a glorious day for Christendom when every Christian has learned that lesson. If preachers, teachers, leaders, committees, choirs, and all members of Christian congregations would imitate God in this matter, and did their very best even in their smallest duties, the whole life of our churches would be revolutionised and "that which is perfect" would immediately appear.



## II

*But notice, in the second place, the modesty of God's harvest-love.*

The greatest part of His work in the harvest-field is done *invisibly*. When the corn is ripening, we can see the sunshine falling upon the crowded rows of corn-plants. But there is one thing we cannot see. We cannot see the thousands of *heat-rays* that God is showering upon the field.

Professor Tyndall found out some years ago that in the glaring electric light there are nine times, nearly ten times, as many *dark heat-rays* sent forth as there are light-rays. Much the same is true of sunshine. Thousands upon thousands of rays fall upon the fields that we can never *see*. Far the greatest part of the work that God does for us, then, is done *invisibly*. He is not anxious that all He does for us should be blazed abroad. The King of Glory is *modest* in His working.

Shall we follow in that path? Praise is sweet to us, and even God loves heart-felt praise. But He leaves it on one side in by far the largest part of the services He renders us. Are we ready, like our Father, to do as much good as we can for others, to make no fuss about it, but rather to be content, as God is, that they should *know nothing about it*?

At the Wesleyan Conference at Nottingham in 1891, the obituary was read of a missionary named Thomas West. He was a generous, loving-hearted man, and had done great work in the Tonga Islands. At the close of his life he had suffered great pain,

but this was one of his latest requests, "Take care that nothing is said about me or my work. I scarcely want to be named. I feel utterly unworthy. *Christ* is exceedingly precious to me, and the truths I have preached to others are unspeakably precious to me."

They were noble words, for they came from a noble heart. Thomas West had the very spirit of his Master. For Christ, as St. Matthew tells us, fulfilled the prophecy, "He shall not strive, nor cry, neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets" (Matt. xii. 19). All was gently and modestly done. There was no trumpeting of His splendid miracles; no advertisement of His life-long unselfishness. If we wish to have the mind of Christ, and a love like that of the great Harvest-Giver, let us take as one of our life-mottoes the words of good Thomas West, "I feel utterly unworthy. I scarcely want to be named."

### III

*But, in the last place, let us notice the boundless liberality of God's harvest-love.*

In the East the average yield of corn is a twenty-fold return of the quantity sown. In ancient times it was much more, and even to-day the return of a hundredfold is still found in some places.

But even if we take the smaller average, it carries with it a wonderful truth. God says to the farmer, "Give me one grain and I will give you back twenty. Give me a hundred grains and I will give you back *two thousand*." The fields are God's banks, and

when farmers deposit their seed there, God does not give them a paltry interest of four or five per cent, but an interest of no less than nineteen hundred per cent! How true it is that "God giveth liberally to all men, and upbraideth not."

But there is another way of looking at it. When God ripens even a single grain of corn, He has to send hundreds of rays of light and heat from the sun. These rays are God's corn-makers. But before they can *begin* their work, they have a journey to make of more than ninety millions of miles. How cheerfully God undertakes all this work for us! He keeps His corn-makers continually flying through the sky, and when they have brought the heat and power of heaven to the harvest-field, a distance of ninety thousands of thousands of miles, He does not charge us one penny for carriage! Truly, indeed, God shows Himself a God of Love.

God is Love, and it is His delight to give. He could not withhold even His Son, but when He saw it would free us from Satan and sin and sorrow, He freely gave up His Only-begotten for us. Oh the depth of the riches of the love of God! For in the second Person of the Trinity we see the same liberal love. To save us from our lost estate He gave up His all. He gave up His hours of joy with the Father in Heaven; He gave *Himself*, and both lived and died for us.

But Christ goes further. He not only proves to us that God is Love, but He says, "Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

Grand and generous as is the character of the King of Heaven, we are to be partakers of that

same glorious nature. We are to pray and think and strive until the world says of every Christian, what St. John says of God—"He is love." And as we think of this year's harvest gift from the hand of our Father, let us not forget the beauteous spirit in which He has sent it—the spirit, too, in which we are invited to live—the spirit of earnest, modest, liberal love.

THE HAPPY PEOPLE

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. J. MORGAN GIBBON

“Happy is that people, that is in such a case : yea, happy is that people, whose God is the Lord.”—PSALM cxliv. 15.

## XVIII

### THE HAPPY PEOPLE

"GOD," said John Donne in his daring way, "is every kind of God. He is one, but this one is a tree that hath divers boughs to shadow and refresh thee, branches to shed fruit on thee, arms to spread out and reach and embrace thee. He is all kinds of God."

Some such thought runs through this psalm, which, properly speaking, is not a psalm at all, but a mosaic of quotations from other psalms. The one original thing in it is the order in which these quotations are arranged. The materials belong to other men, but the standpoint is the collector's own. He is not a mere compiler. He adds to his materials what the architect adds to his. The quarry yields the stones, but the architect determines the form in which they shall be grouped. So over and above the thoughts that belong to other men there is here the one architectural formative thought that belongs to the psalm-builder himself. That thought is that God is our centre, and equally near and necessary to every point in life's circumference. Circumstances are nothing. Contact with God is everything.

## I

Take, for example, the warrior with sword or pen. He makes a stand against evil. His is a strenuous, perilous, stormy life. But he is on the circumference, and therefore as near God as any one.

Listen. Our psalmist has an admirable quotation in point :

Blessed be the Lord my rock,  
Which teacheth my hands to war,  
And my fingers to fight :  
My lovingkindness, and my fortress,  
My high tower, and my deliverer,  
My shield, and he in whom I trust.

Who said that? David, says the superscription of the psalm, in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hands of his enemies and from the hand of Saul.

In that long, bitter duel of ideas David was the champion of the truest truth then known on earth, and hero of a hundred fights though he was, his soul was preserved unsoured and sweet. The leafy bough was over him, the fruitful branch shed all manner of fruit upon him, and he is known less as the warrior than as the sweet singer of Israel. Many were his faults, gross and terrible his sins, yet his face was toward the light, he struggled out of each miry slough on the side nearer the city, and God was to him "all kinds of God,"—"my lovingkindness, my fortress, my tower, my shield."

It has been said that our Protestant authors and



preachers of the seventeenth century were "men of war who carried the dust of the arena into the pulpit." Certainly their style is somewhat crabbed and ungainly.

But controversy does not of necessity sour a man. Paul was ever a fighter; so was Milton; while St. John reports a great controversy which Jesus had with the Pharisees in Jerusalem. But did Luther lose his vision of God when, issuing from his cell, he nailed his theses to the church door and led the fight for freedom?

Was not the controversy with error and injustice a means of grace to Milton and to Cromwell? Did Paul's soul suffer while he wrote his Epistle to the Galatians? No. Happiness is not in circumstances. Peace is not mere quietness. Nor is spirituality a denizen of the cloister.

Blessed be the Lord my rock,  
Which teacheth my fingers to fight :  
My loving-kindness, and my fortress.

Happiness is being in touch with Him. All our peace is in His will; spirituality is the fruit of loyal service. The happy people are the people whose God is the Lord.

## II

Ah, but some one will say—"I have no great battle to fight. I am a man of little account. My troubles are of the meanest kind. They are very real to *me*; but to other eyes they must appear insignificant and ridiculous." Nay, but you are on the circumference, and as near God as anybody is.

Take a look at the next quotation which our collector has built into his psalm :

Lord, what is man, that thou takest knowledge of him?  
Man is like a breath—a shadow that passeth.

“Well, did I not say that I was of no account? What hope is there for a mere shadow?” Nay, but read on :

Man is like a breath.  
Bow thy heavens, O Lord, and come down.  
Stretch forth thy two hands from above ;  
Rescue and deliver me out of great waters !

*This* is the true argument from human weakness. The smaller we are, the more we need God's help. “O God, Thy sea is great and my boat is so small !” prayed the Breton fisherman.

“Man is like a breath,” *therefore* prays the psalmist, making an argument out of his mortality —“Stretch forth thy two hands and rescue me.”

The Happy People, who are they? The great, the strong, the rich, the famous? My friend, if God were not and were not *Love*, if we “mortal millions dwelt alone,” the very idea of *human* greatness would be ridiculous. What is our strength before Death's all-levelling scythe? What is wealth but a pile of yellow dust, and fame but a mocking echo? “Man is like a breath.”

But now is Christ risen from the dead, because God is love. He is become the first-fruits of them who are asleep, “for his mercy endureth for ever.”

No man is weak or poor or insignificant, for he has a share in all the greatness and wealth of God.

"I will sing a new song unto Thee, O God," even I who am like to vanity, whose days are as a shadow :

Upon a psaltery of ten strings will I sing praises unto thee.

God is our Redeemer from insignificance, our Saviour from nothingness. In Him we see ourselves immortal. We belong to the Happy People because our God is the Lord.

### III

Finally, our psalm-builder produces from that wonderful note-book of his a delightful little lyric of all-round prosperity.

Here we have a picture of the happy homes of Israel :

"When our sons shall be as plants grown up in their youth"—strong, vigorous, and full of the fairest promise—"and our daughters as corner-stones hewn after the fashion of a palace"—that is, graceful, pious, sensible, and strong ; for the world is built on the goodness of women—"When our garners are full, our sheep bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields"; for wool was king in Israel, as not so long ago wool was king in England—"When our oxen are well laden"; when trade flourishes and export is brisk—"When there is no breaking and no going forth"; when there is no fear of invasion and no fever of imperialism, but a year of plenty is crowned with peace on earth and goodwill among men.

It is a charming picture of an earthly paradise, as

yet realised nowhere. At the moment we in this country come as near to it perhaps as ever we did. England abounds in happy homes, full of wholesome youths and graceful maidens. We have wealth abundant. We are the chief traders of the world. And we have peace. We have little fear of any invader in "this sceptred isle"

This fortress built by Nature for herself . . .  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands.

Yet at best it is, as Shakespeare says, but a demi-paradise. Few homes are as happy as they might be. Amid all our wealth we find a vast poverty almost as poor as poverty can be. We defeat the ends of Nature, we triumph over her bounty, and in a world so rich that it might well defy any one to starve we produce starvation.

Verily, among the works of man there is none more marvellous than this! But suppose it were not so. Suppose the lovely picture of these verses became fact and framed itself in actual experience—

Happy is the people, that is in such a case.

Surely that is felicity?

"No!" says the Syriac version—"No. Happy is the people, whose God is the Lord."

'Tis not in things to make man happy or unhappy, for he lives not by bread alone, but by the words of God.

In country districts many people who rarely or

never attend divine service at other times feel as it were in honour bound to attend the Harvest Thanksgiving. The harvest is such a manifest good gift of God that it would be unmannerly not to make some acknowledgment.

But the value of all things lies in their significance. The real value of the miracle bread with which Christ stayed the hunger of the crowd in the desert lay in its sacramental significance. It was a visible parable of the Bread of Life.

The earth is fair, her kindly fruits are good and sweet, but what do they *mean*? What is the Gospel of the Earth? the evangel of the four seasons? Do they mean that there is a sun behind the sun? Do they mean that behind the gifts there is a great Being, some one that gives?

Think of the cost of a single day. Think of all the cosmic forces that must conspire to produce a harvest. Who is worthy of all this? Worthy of sun and moon and mellow autumn fields? My friend! we are not dealt with after our sins nor rewarded after our iniquities. The harvest is of grace, not of works. It is the glory of God, not man. Earthly prosperity, though it rose to Eden heights, can show but a little part of the felicity of the Happy People.

The palace, despite all its wealth, is too poor and small a thing to show forth the happy lot of the children of the house. You must see them in the light of the father's and the mother's love, for love is the root and the fruit of happiness.

Thank God for a good harvest! Thank God for national prosperity and for peace! These are good

gifts, and help to make a happy people. But they are the least of the things for which we owe Him thanks. They are perishable ; but the grace of which they are the veils and symbols is imperishable, inexhaustible, unbounded.

Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven ;  
To His feet thy tribute bring ;  
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
Who like thee His praise should sing ?

THE TEMPORAL AND THE  
SPIRITUAL

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. T. RHONDDA WILLIAMS

A STUDY IN JOEL





## XIX

### THE TEMPORAL AND THE SPIRITUAL

IF you read the book of Joel in the Revised Version you see that it divides naturally into two parts, the first part ending with ii. 17. In the first part Joel describes the calamity which roused him to prophesy, and looks upon it as the sure omen of approaching judgment, and calls upon the people to turn to the Lord with all their heart. The presumption, then, is that the people did so ; and the second part announces that the Lord had pity on them, and turned all His judgment upon the heathen, giving to His own people every prosperity, temporal and spiritual.

Note, first, that the occasion of this prophecy was great temporal distress—agricultural distress caused by a long drought and a plague of locusts.

The drought seems to have been very severe. The seeds were rotting under the clods ; the corn was withered ; the beasts groaned and the cattle were perplexed and the sheep desolate, we are told, because there was no pasture, and because the water-brooks had dried up. More than that, fire had broken out and devoured the trees of the field.

As for the locusts, they had wrought terrible destruction. Joel's description of them is such in

some places that many expositors have supposed the locusts in the book were but a figure to denote destructive enemies. But Joel himself settles the question in ii. 4, where he says the appearance of the locusts is "as the appearance of horses, and as horsemen, so do they run."

It is difficult for us in this country to realise what this locust plague is like, and what feelings it awakened. G. A. Smith has spent a great deal of time in Palestine, and has given special and expert attention to all the physical phenomena of the country.

He tells us that he only saw one swarm of locusts, and though it was small and soon swept away by the wind, yet he felt many of the features Joel describes: he felt some degree of that singular helplessness before a calamity that seemed to suggest something far beyond itself; he felt something of that supernatural edge and accent which, by the confession of so many observers, characterise the locust plague and the earthquake above all other physical disasters. And he has gathered together the testimonies of several modern travellers, which agree wonderfully with Joel's description.

Mr. James Bryce, in his *Impressions of South Africa*, has described one of these swarms. "The whole air, to 12 or even 18 feet above the ground, is filled with insects, reddish brown in body, with bright gauzy wings. When the sun's rays catch them, it is like a sea of sparkling light. When you see them against a cloud they are like the dense flakes of a driving snowstorm. You feel as if you had never before realised immensity in number.

Vast crowds of men gathered at a festival, countless tree-tops rising along the slope of a forest ridge, the chimneys of London houses from the top of St. Paul's—all are as nothing to the myriads of insects that blot out the sun above, and cover the ground beneath, and fill the air whichever way one looks—appalling in their power of collective devastation.”

Another witness says: “The whole face of the mountain was black with them. On they came like a living deluge. We dug trenches and kindled fires, and beat and burnt to death heaps upon heaps, but the effort was useless.” Another: “The roads were covered with them, all marching and in regular lines, like armies of soldiers, with their leaders in front; all the opposition of man to resist their progress was in vain.” This is like Joel’s description: “They run like mighty men; they climb the wall like men of war; and they march every one on his ways, and they break not their ranks.”

One says: “Whatever one is doing, one hears their noise from without, like the noise of armed hosts, or the running of many waters. When in an erect position their appearance at a little distance is like that of well-armed horsemen.”

Now these travellers tell us that locusts are just perfect creatures for a plague, because they have the most unscrupulous appetite: they are the incarnation of hunger. “No voracity is like theirs,” says Smith: “the voracity of little creatures whose million separate appetites nothing is too minute to escape.” Their teeth are like saws, admirably calculated to eat up all the herbs of the land. And that is what they do. They have been known to devour every green

herb and every blade of grass over vast stretches—eighty and ninety miles of country. Garden and forest and field they leave absolutely bare. When they have done with the country they attack the town: “They leap upon the city; they run upon the wall; they climb up into the houses; they enter in at the windows like a thief,” as Joel says. The palmerworm, the cankerworm, and the caterpillar of which he speaks are probably only different kinds of locusts, or locusts in different stages of growth. With these descriptions in mind, we can indeed imagine the terrible distress which made Joel prophesy. The question has been raised as to why a phenomenon so common in the country should be now considered as the signal of exceptional judgment. The probability is that this was exceptionally severe and prolonged, and, being accompanied by the drought and the fires, made the calamity very terrible. And one result of it which gave Joel much uneasiness was that it had prevented the people bringing the meal-offering and the drink-offering to the temple. Joel was an enthusiastic churchman; he would put the temple claim before all other claims, and when the people failed to meet that it was calamitous indeed. Most of us have gone to the other extreme: we put the temple claim last, and if any distress only meant that we had to cut down the offertory at church, or even omit it altogether, we should certainly not think the end of the world was come. It is when the distress touches the cigar allowance, and cuts down the wine order, and curtails our amusements, takes away our money for “gates” and “early doors” that we feel the pinch and begin to cry out.

But to Joel the interruption to the temple offertory was perhaps the most serious aspect of the calamity.

Now let us see what he makes of it. He sees in it the augury of the Day of Judgment. Why it should come upon the people he does not say. He does not accuse them of any particular sins, and yet he calls upon them to turn unto the Lord with all their hearts, and to rend their hearts and not their garments.

Joel, you must remember, had no physical science: to him this plague was the direct act of God, and not only so, but it had a direct relation to the life of the people, and a direct purpose regarding them. And therefore, though he could not particularise their sins, there must be something wrong; and, in any case, what was wanted was a thorough turning to God, a united and hearty religious devotion, and Joel hopes that this would ward off the judgment—God would repent of the evil He was intending to do. Joel here comes upon a thought over which we may well pause, viz. that though we may be going on faithfully in our ceremonial religion, attending well, as these people had been doing, to religious duties, yet there may be something wrong—there may indeed be very much wrong. When Joel says, “Rend your hearts,” has the thought struck him that perhaps in all their attention to the temple they had been too outward? They had brought the right offerings at the right time; they had kept the statutes as promised; they had paid their tithes regularly; and yet, in spite of all this, here is an awful calamity, evidently announcing a Day of Judgment. Had they been sufficiently real in religion? Oh let

them turn to the Lord—that seems to have been the course of Joel's thought. You may say that Joel's fright was superstitious, that the locusts did not reveal the intentions of God in the way he thought, and that the temporal calamity had nothing to do with the spiritual character of the people. I think you are right, but there are some great truths related to the superstition which we in these times need to emphasise. We are not quite so open to the influence of the exceptional as people were long ago. The conception of law is familiar to us, and a specially severe storm comes within its operations. This being so, and this being right, let us not miss, through mere familiarity, the religious significance of the normal and the regular. We still want to insist that God lives and rules in Nature; that Nature is not dead, not mechanical; and that the God who rules in Nature and the God who trains human character are one and the same. Many modern thinkers split the universe in two—Nature on the one side, man on the other. So even Huxley did in his Romanes Lecture in 1893. I am glad to see that John Fiske, in his book *Through Nature to God*, makes a vigorous statement of the opposite view. From the standpoint of the evolutionist he claims Nature to be pervaded by a moral trend; says that evolution makes it clear that an ethical purpose runs through Nature from the beginning. It is only in this view we can rest the mind: the order is one, not two—the God of Nature and of man one and the same. Man therefore does right in reading meanings of God in Nature, in taking all the influences for good which he can take from her. We

boast that we do not believe in interferences of God in Nature, and so we are not terrified by things as people used to be, nor scream out in the storm that the Day of Judgment is coming.

But if God's action in Nature is not that of occasional interference, *it is* that of constant manifestation ; not in the tempest is God any more than in the gentle break of dawn. If so ; if, instead of now and then, God is always here ; if, instead of in one place, He is everywhere, surely Nature to us should be a more religious influence, not a less, than it was to the Hebrews. Every sight of the beauty of the flower, and every vision of pure sky, should be to us a time of judgment on sin, a condemnation of the stains of the soul ; in the presence of the stars we should be ashamed of all uncleanness. Let us see to it that our wider faith does not influence us less than the narrower faith influenced Joel ; that, if we reject the superstition, we live by the truth. A man told me the other day that the modern conception of God was too large to be real to men, too vast to make itself felt : the God who is everywhere is apt to be nowhere ; you must specialise and limit, he said, if you want to make the thought of God effective. There is, of course, some truth in that. We always do it, and inevitably. All thinking is limitation. All human thought of God, therefore, does specialise and limit Him. But within this human thought there are many degrees from narrowest to broadest. The danger of the broad thought is said to be the want of intensity. But anyway, if the truth is that God is everywhere, the thought that comes nearest the truth is the best thought, and if

that carries any disadvantage with it, our business is not to cast the thought away, but to conquer the disadvantage. If it is more difficult to realise the Universal God than the local God, the God of the great universe than the God of the little one, we must overcome the difficulty by personal communion with God and thoughtful interpretation of life. Our world is larger than Joel's and much richer. Take care we do not think less of God than he; we have more knowledge, we should have more piety. Let not the curse of familiarity fall upon this sacred world.

The second part of Joel's prophecy proceeds upon the assumption that the people responded to his call, and God turned the judgment from them. He restores the broken fortunes, repairs the desolation of the locusts, and brings in the most auspicious prosperity. The pastures of the wilderness do spring, the tree beareth her fruit, the fig and the vine yield their strength, the drought is over, the former and the latter rain come in due measure, there is plenty everywhere.

And best of all, he says, "It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh." Afterward! After what? After the people have recognised in the return of prosperity that Jehovah is their God.

Mark this connection, ii. 27, "Ye shall know," etc.; v. 28, "And it shall come to pass," etc. It is one thing to know God; it is another thing to be filled with God's Spirit; one thing to hold a truth as proved, quite another to be held by it and swayed by the spirit of it. Some people are always asking



for proofs of the truths of religion, for sufficient evidence, as they call it. My friends, you might have that and not have religion. Joel here lights upon the difference between theological conviction and religious enthusiasm. The people take it as proved that Jehovah is their God. But something more is wanted—the pouring out of the Spirit. You are, of course, not satisfied with their proof; you want other proofs of God. Now, if you get them—if you obtain intellectual satisfaction of the existence of God—you may still be without religion. Frances Power Cobbe, who is herself a theist, divides theists into two classes, those who pray and those who do not pray. To the former theism is a religion; to the latter it is a philosophy—a refined, liberal, and ennobling philosophy, but not a religion. What is the difference? This philosophy or theology is a thought *of* God; the religion is a thought *to* God. The difference is great. You may think wisely of God; but if there is no more there is no religion. Religion means closeness of intercourse, consciousness of the actual presence of God, living at His heart, thinking to Him. To have a true theology is to possess knowledge; to have a true religion is to be possessed by a spirit. “Ye shall know,” said Joel; “And afterward I will pour out my spirit.”

Let us not be content with anything less than this for ourselves. And now we must go a step beyond Joel. We will desire this for all men. Did not Joel? “All flesh”? No, all flesh to Joel meant all Jews; other nations must be destroyed.

Time has carried us into a wider ocean of revelation. We have seen the Divine Spirit at work

among the various nations of the earth, and our ideal therefore of the coming time is not that of a saved nation but a saved world :

Come, kingdom of our God,  
And make the broad earth Thine ;  
Stretch o'er her lands and isles the rod  
That flowers with grace divine.

Soon may all tribes be blest  
With fruit from life's glad tree ;  
And in its shade like brothers rest,  
Sons of one family.

# GOOD THINGS OF GOD

Harvest Festival Sermon

By Rev. J. THEW

“And thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the Lord thy God hath given unto thee.”—DEUT. xxvi. 11.

## XX

### GOOD THINGS OF GOD

NOTHING is more plainly taught in Scripture than the duty of patience and submission in the dark and cloudy days. Such days find their way into the calender of every life—days of care, of anxiety, of affliction, of loss—and while the Holy Book never pretends that chastisements are other than grievous, it steadfastly rebukes, in some places it sternly forbids, the murmuring or the rebellious spirit. That is apparent in all the Almighty's dealings with His ancient people, and its highest exemplification is breathed in the words of the Saviour, "Father, not my will, but thine be done."

But life is not all dark and cloudy days. We have our seasons of sunshine as well as of shower. And one of the most important of practical questions is just this—What are we to do with them? Our times of health and buoyant spirits, of commercial success, of domestic happiness, of good fortune in friends, and so on—how are these things to be received? And the wise words of my text make answer, "Thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the Lord thy God hath given thee."

The connection in which the words are found is

worth a moment's notice. In view of their entrance into the Promised Land, Moses is giving instructions to his people. When their entrance and settlement shall have been effected, they are to take the first-fruits of the harvest and present them before the Lord. That is to say, they are to gratefully recognise the good hand which brought them into the places of "milk and honey." "Be sure," the veteran leader seems to say, "that you acknowledge God as the bountiful Giver of all you shall possess." "Then," he proceeds to add, "you shall rejoice in every good thing which the Lord your God hath given you."

There are few things more surprising than the attitude of some Christians in relation to this matter. The French are credited with the saying that the English take their pleasures sadly. Something like that is characteristic of the Christians to whom I refer. They would not go the length of saying that all pleasure is sin. The day of that dismal doctrine is past and gone. But yet when a full cup is wrung out to them, a cup not of sorrow but of joy, it is pressed to timid lips, or it is diluted with drops of bitterness—pensive reflections and what not—lest it should prove too sweet. If a beam of light fall across their dark and cloudy day, they are half afraid to walk in it, and they turn back to their sorrow as though there were something meritorious in declining even providential relief. There is nothing to support this attitude in the Good Book. No sense of personal ill-desert, no notions of the Divine requirements, no pretence of superiority to the natural and innocent pleasures and alleviations

of life can justify it. The order, from which without violence we cannot depart is this, "Thou shalt first acknowledge the hand of God in what of good has fallen to thee, and then thou shalt rejoice in every good thing which the Lord thy God has given thee."

It may seem a little out of place to speak on such a subject in a day like this. And I certainly counsel no feverish pleasure-hunting. That were carrying coals to Newcastle indeed. I enjoin the full and glad acceptance not of those pleasures which have to be beaten up, which have to be sought and strained after, which have to be planned for, schemed for, and usually suffered for. Of every good thing—mark the qualification—"which the Lord thy God hath given thee." There is no room in that for mere excitements, for frivolities, for anything which conflicts with the earnest business of life and living. Moses simply counsels the people not merely to gratefully accept the good things which come to them in the providence of God, but without hesitation or misgiving to enjoy them. Evil has its purpose, and it is achieved when the head is bowed and the heart is humbled. Good has its purpose, and it cannot be achieved unless it be thoroughly and thankfully enjoyed. The only explanation of human life is that it is a school of training, but do you think that He whose school it is wishes to train us on one side of our nature only? There is education in a smile as well as in a tear, in the laughter of the children as in the sobbing and the sighing of the contrite heart, in the good things which the Lord our God gives us as in the evil things which also we receive at His hand.

The truth is that Christian men have come almost to deify sorrow. I think it was Dean Alford who wrote, "What thou hast not in sorrow learned, presume not thou to teach." What then? Is there nothing to be learned on the mountain-tops? Are all the treasures of truth and wisdom confined to the valleys? Are the highest lessons to be gained only in cities of sorrow and places of tombs? And is the garden of the Lord unable to produce any? It is an entire half-truth. "Shadow and sun for every one as the years roll on." And, believe me, if we will keep a grateful heart, an open mind, and a steady head, we shall find as much that is worth learning when the sun shines as under the appointed conditions we may when the shadows fall.

There is one difficulty in the way, I think it was never felt so much as it is to-day. All men who do not use the good things which the Lord their God gives them in an unworthy and purely selfish manner are frequently beset by such questions as these. Is it right for any one to be happy, even for a time, when in this confused world there is so much misery? Is it legitimate? Nay, can it be done? We lift the cup to our lips, we recognise the hand that has prepared and holds it, but we feel inclined to pour its contents on the ground, as David poured the water from the well. What shall we say?

Much of our efficiency in ministering to the dark lives of others depends upon the amount of sunshine that comes into our own. "The Lord preserve us," says a distinguished London preacher, one of the most humane of men, "from physicians and reformers who are too sympathetically intent upon our maladies



and disorders to be capable of enjoying the enjoyable!" And he adds, "They are anything but great at healing."

It is even so. God forbid that I should discourage the feelings and sentiments to which I allude, but there are men and women who have made themselves partially useless, partially helpless, by an over-indulgence of them.

Depend upon it, if we are to do healing work, we must be healthy in ourselves. And we cannot have health if we spend our lives in the valleys of shadows.

The good things which the Lord our God gives us are meant to encourage, to stimulate, and to support us. And he who takes them so may take them with both hands, calling, as he does so, on the name of the Lord.

If the Fatherhood of God have any meaning, we are His children. And however much children may wish to help their Father, they cannot carry the burden that is His. Nor does He require it at our hands. And when He says, "Come, my children, rest a while. Come to the green pastures and the still waters. Come and play as well as work. Is not play as well as work an essential condition of children's growth?" far be it from us to treat the "good thing" as something that is ours as by a species of theft.

"He sendeth sun, He sendeth shower, and both are needful for the flower." But then He *sendeth sun*. And let the flower enjoy it when He does.

And now, do you think your preacher has forgotten you?—You whose day is not the day of

“good things,” so called, and rightly so called? Here is the text for you. “Shall we receive good at the hand of God? And shall we not receive evil?” Remember, they are both from the same hand!—the same great, safe, and sure hand! There is wisdom, there is love in all His ways, alike in the hour when our cup runneth over and in the hour when it seems to be dashed from our hands!

This is the highest philosophy of life, this is the ultimate of the highest piety, to rejoice in every good thing which the Lord our God shall give us! And to trust Him when His way is in the sea and His footsteps are not known!

THE END







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